

DRAGON IN PARADISE

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General Mason, who has been named chief of MAAG, the American group of military advisers to the Thai government, arrives in Thailand with his aide, Captain Cooper. He finds the country, for all its colour and romance, an oriental brew of intrigue, lust and dark ambition. The Prime Minister is threatened from all sides; an Air Marshal has a *coup d'état* glint in his eye; an American Colonel is leaking military secrets; and the Communists at the northern border are preparing to move in and "free" the country. Conspiracies on all sides, a star-crossed love affair between Cooper and a beautiful Thai, the tragic death of an officer through the stupidity of his superior, and the promiscuity of a MAAG secretary, all combine to carry the book to its tense, exciting climax.

DRAGON IN PARADISE

The cabin of the four-engined military plane was comfortably cool, but, far below, shimmering heat waves could be seen rising from the inundated Siamese rice fields. The fifteen passengers—Army officers and enlisted men, together with their wives and children—had enplaned for Bangkok eight hours earlier at Clark Field in the Philippines and were now stretched out in various stages of lethargy on the uncomfortable bucket seats. Lack of sleep, a box lunch (two dried-out ham sandwiches and an apple) and the monotonous throb of the motors had induced a state of restless torpor broken only when the needs of a fretful child demanded a visit to the latrine; this meant a lurching, stumbling trip through a rubble of empty lunch cartons, discarded magazines, and piled suitcases and mailbags tied down in the centre of the aisle.

Two regulation aeroplane seats upholstered in blue mohair had been lashed to the floor in the centre of the cabin. There, in an island of cool detachment, sat a powerfully built man with greying hair, and his wife. Hour after hour they had sat quietly reading, his large, tanned hand placed possessively over hers on the armrest in silent affirmation of their withdrawal from the surrounding disorder. Other male passengers had removed their jackets but the man in the blue chair still wore his. Devoid of ribbons and decorations, it bore on the shoulder the star of a brigadier general.

The presence of the General and his wife in the plane had created a certain amount of tension, subduing the usual chatter of the women, accustomed loud exchanges of confidences between privates, complaints of children and the shop-talk of officers and men. Whenever the conversational level rose appreciably, senior officers would stare pointedly at the

offenders until they subsided. Mothers shushed complaining children with quick side-glances at the two chairs, and enlisted men were inclined to fold back the more lurid covers of their paperbacks.

Captain Cooper, Aide-de-Camp to the General, slouched in a bucket seat opposite the mohair chairs, idly flipping the pages of a picture magazine he had picked up at Clark. It contained an extensive article on Thailand written by Elsie Webster, whom he recognised as the well-known and reputedly highest-paid woman correspondent in America. The piece had lush colour photographs of temples, saffron-robed priests and canals teeming with smiling humanity, and it displayed the slick journalistic competence developed by Miss Webster during her years as a war reporter in Korea. The substance of the article was an amalgam of Thai history, interviews with the King and Prime Minister, talks with the American Ambassador ("Mad Mike" Murphy) and several conversations with the "man in the street."

Cooper had read and reread the article, searching for clues to the nature of the Siamese with whom he would be dealing as a member of the team of American military advisers. The smooth prose gave only a thin and inconsequential picture of the people themselves. Had the article been a military staff study, he could imagine the General's scrawled note across the front: "Omit gobbledy gook! State (a) problem and (b) solution!"

Cooper surveyed the husky figure in the blue chair, noting that although General Mason held a book, he was no longer reading. Cooper assumed he was thinking about Thailand and his new command. Mrs. Mason looked at the Aide and they exchanged smiles. He reflected, not for the first time, that with her wide blue eyes and the fine bone structure of her face she must have been breathtakingly beautiful as a young girl. He knew she was forty-five, at least, and her brown hair was streaked with grey but there was a kind of classic leveliness about her. Beside her trim figure in a simple blue dress and

dark jacket, the other women in the plane looked fussy and a little pretentious.

The knowledge that the man in the chair was their new commander and that he and his wife were seeing them for the first time under such inauspicious conditions had unnerved the passengers, especially the ladies. Cooper, aware of their uneasiness, smiled to himself. Their apprehensions were better founded than they knew. He could have told them that the General, despite his apparent absorption in his book, hadn't missed a single detail. He also knew that, at the moment, the General faced greater problems than a littered floor and some whimpering children.

During the Pentagon briefings, Cooper had realised the high command was not quite satisfied with the situation in Thailand. Nothing tangible had been brought out but the intimation was unmistakable. The Army, ponderous and sometimes unwieldy in operation, nevertheless had a surprisingly delicate ear, and certain disquieting echoes had evidently reached the grey building on the Potomac.

Cooper knew that the General, through the years, had developed a canny appreciation of those echoes and possessed that sixth sense which, behind the impassive façade of command, allows a man to spot weaknesses, however camouflaged by snappy salutes and shining coffee urns in the mess hall.

He had watched the General face appalling reverses in the dark days of the Korean campaign and, later on, master the intricacies of Pentagon duty. This new assignment, however, would be at a much higher level, involving the military policies of a nation. Failure could prove disastrous, not only to Thailand but to General Mason personally.

At the Washington briefing, Cooper had learned about the "MAAGs"—Military Assistance Advisory Groups—established by the United States in various foreign countries that had requested American military aid to defend themselves in the cold war.

Each MAAG had Army, Air Force and Naval

representatives who supervised the shipment and storage of equipment. Where requested, MAAGs acted also as training advisers. However, since recipient countries were not required to *take* the advice, the instructors sometimes found themselves in an equivocal position, being without jurisdiction over the men they advised.

Thailand, rich and free, standing in the path of the Communist sweep throughout the East, was in an acutely vulnerable position. The President had once termed Thailand the "cork in the bottle" of Southeast Asia. At the briefing, Cooper had been impressed with the importance of the Thailand MAAG in this context.

Looking out of the window, Cooper saw what appeared to be the outskirts of a city. He checked his watch and then proceeded to don his blouse, adjusting the gold aide-de-camp aiguillette on the jacket already decorated with three rows of ribbons and a parachute badge.

Seeing the slender, grey-eyed young man putting on his uniform, the rest of the passengers bestirred themselves; mothers corralling fretful children and men tucking in their shirts and yanking at neckties.

The noise level in the aircraft rose and the passengers, peering through the windows, saw pursuit planes assembling in escort formation on each side of the plane, close enough so that the bronzed faces of the Thai pilots were visible. The copilot, hurrying back to the blue seats, explained to the General that it was his escort from the Royal Thai Air Force.

Passengers craned their necks to watch the formation outside the plane windows until the warning buzzer brought them to their seats to fasten safety belts. The plane began to descend. In a few moments, buildings started to whirl past the windows and, after a gentle bounce, a wave of heat swept through the cabin as the plane taxied along the concrete runway. With a roar, props were reversed and the plane shuddered into a turn while occupants opened safety belts and the buckles clashed against the metal seats. The thin aluminium skin of the plane

began suddenly reverberating to the beat of drums. Through the windows they could see a band playing and rows of blue-uniformed men standing at attention. Another turn of the plane brought into view a group of officers and their ladies, flower leis draped over their arms, the men holding their caps and the women clutching skirts against the prop blast sweeping over them.

The pilot escorted the General to the door, followed by Mrs. Mason and Captain Cooper, where they stepped into blinding sunlight and the crash of band music. At the bottom of the ramp, standing in front of the group was a smiling, white-haired man whom Cooper recognised from Elsie Webster's article as Ambassador Murphy.

The General descended the stairs as the Thai band broke into ruffles and flourishes and the sound of trumpets echoed from the terminal building façade.

Cooper watched while the General, accompanied by the Ambassador, was introduced to the assembled Thai and American officers. The ranking Thai appeared to be a thin, aged man in a resplendent white uniform glittering with loops of gold braid, his shoulders bearing the insignia of a field marshal. After placing his fingertips together in what was evidently the Thai greeting, he extended a fragile hand to the General.

When General Mason had passed down the impromptu receiving line, a swarthy, corpulent Thai in a gold-laced blue uniform stepped forward and accompanied him on the formal guard-mount inspection, at the completion of which the General, Mrs. Mason and Cooper, draped with fragrant leis, were escorted to the terminal building.

As they entered, Cooper was called aside by a short, rather stooped American officer with greying hair and steel-rimmed glasses who introduced himself as Colonel White, acting Chief of MAAG. "Quarters for you and the General have been arranged at the Chakri Hotel," he said. "I suppose you'll want to check on them right away. Captain Mannon, our Adjutant,

will ride out with you.” He turned to a slender, black-haired man standing beside him and, after introductions, the Colonel added, “Mannon, be sure to bring Captain Cooper to my house for a drink on your way to the hotel,” and, to Cooper, “General and Mrs. Mason will be my guests at dinner tonight. I’ll send them out to the hotel at about eleven.”

When the Colonel had proceeded into the terminal, the Adjutant turned to Cooper. “Boy, are we glad to see General Mason!”

“How come?”

Captain Mannon shrugged. “Oh, you’ll find out . . .”

Cooper pointed to two gold stars on Mannon’s paratroop wings. “Two combat jumps. Where were they?”

“Holland and Korea,” said Mannon. He stood looking at the aide for a moment and then grabbed his arm. “Goddamn, man, it’s nice to have another trooper here! Besides us, there’s only one other jumper in MAAG. The rest are all straight-legs!

“Now look, Jim,” he continued, “your name is Jim, isn’t it? I think everything has been taken care of but I’d like to handle this project in the good old airborne ‘all the way’ style. Let’s start with the baggage. It’s in the carryall. Want to count the pieces?”

Finishing with the bags, Cooper repointed Mannon, who again took him by the arm. “If we hubba-hubba into the VIP room we can get some of the free champagne!”

Inside the terminal building, Mannon steered Cooper into a large room that appeared to be a special salon for the reception of important visitors. Threading their way through the crush of guests they reached the long polished table that held the silver buckets and pyramided glassware. They managed to down a quick glass of wine before the departure of the convoy was announced.

Double-timing back to the carryall they climbed aboard as the sirens of the motorcycle escort indicated that the column was getting under way.

The airport was a half-hour drive from the city along a narrow macadam road flanked by a klong—a shallow canal over which little wooden bridges led to individual houses. From the speeding carryall, Cooper could see the laughing, naked children cavorting in the water, each little girl wearing a heart-shaped medallion, suspended below a string around her waist, which bounced freely as she dived and played about on the bank.

“What’s the point of those things?” he asked.

“I suppose it lets the little boys know which ones are little girls,” said Mannon.

Cooper smiled. “. . . so I asked for it!”

A little later Mannon said, “You’ll have a chance to meet some of the MAAG crowd at Colonel White’s house.”

“I don’t think I ought to stay very long, though. . . .”

“Don’t worry. The good Colonel and his lady always see to it that the peons do not get a chance to over-indulge!” said Mannon. “You’re lucky, Jim, to be with the General. If you’d come here on regular assignment, you’d soon find out what it’s really like.”

As Mannon proceeded to explain MAAG operations, Cooper gathered that the Thailand assignment was not a particularly happy one. “All the brass really want,” said Mannon, snorting with disgust, “is to find their picture in *Thailand Illustrated* shaking hands with the Prime Minister at some goddamned cocktail party. So, of course, the rest of us are told to ‘get along with the Thais or else.’ Anyone who has the bad taste to insist that howitzers be cleaned after firing is liable to find himself homeward bound in short order.”

“Does Colonel White go along with this?” asked Cooper.

“Wait until you really know that silly son of a bitch!”

"How about the Thais?" asked Cooper.

"A little too much 'Mai Ben Rai.' Otherwise they're tops."

"Mai Ben Rai?"

"It's Thai for 'Never mind' or 'The hell with it.' They're not like the Japs or the Chinese—they just believe in taking everything easy. It'll be six months before you'll begin to understand these people."

The carryall continued on the highway, passing Thai houses thatched with nipa palm leaves and shacks built out over the klongs on wooden piles. Now and then an old Thai woman, crouched by the side of the road, would smile at the passing convoy, her teeth and lips stained black from years of chewing betel nut.

Most of the young girls they passed were extremely handsome and many carried babies astride their hips. Cooper was intrigued by what he saw of the Thais—lounging under clumps of bougainvillea or sitting beside the lotus blossoms on the banks of the klongs, grinning at the passing cars and showing only a cursory interest in the shrieking sirens. The driver, turning off the road at Colonel White's residence, drew up before a modern-style house in teak and gold-flecked brick, set in the middle of a wide green lawn.

Mrs. White was waiting at the door. Short and just beginning to give way to middle-aged plumpness, she greeted them with a peculiar Southern drawl, designed to evoke magnolia blossoms and old lace but somehow not quite hiding the reinforced concrete beneath. As they shook hands Cooper decided that her eyes gave her away—they were bright, ungrateful blue, like a pigeon's.

"Captain Cooper," she drawled, placing her hand lightly on his arm. "The Colonel and the General just found out they were classmates at the Point! Ah told Eleanor Mason ah just *know* it's goin' to be a delightful tour . . . like old times!" She laughed, casually glancing down at Cooper's hand and he caught a flicker of surprise when she saw he did not wear a

West Point ring. Then she led him and Mannon inside, insisting that they try "mah very own favourite" . . . which turned out to be a gimlet.

"Now, Frank," she said to Mannon, "take the Captain around and introduce him."

The first MAAG officer Cooper met was the Army adviser, Colonel Hawley, tall and gaunt with a cadaverous face. Peering over his glasses as he spoke, he seemed to look down on his colleagues with the air of a man who found them quite hopeless. He reminded Cooper of the minister in *Rain*.

Commander Enright, Chief of the MAAG Navy section, could be heard before he was seen. Short and ruddy, he showed signs of already having had one too many. He pumped Cooper's hand vigorously and then introduced his counterpart, the Thai Admiral, who was shorter and even more corpulent.

Alone for a moment after the introductions, Cooper stepped off the lanai into the garden. Strolling past a tamarind tree he stopped short at the sight of his host, Colonel White, engaged in deep conversation with a Thai officer. He had started to withdraw when the Colonel glanced in his direction annoyed. Recognising him, White immediately recovered his poise and invited him over. "Let me introduce the General's aide, sir," he said to the Thai and, to Cooper, "This is Air Marshal Wicharn, Commander of the Thai Air Force."

Cooper shook hands, recognising the swarthy Thai as the officer who had accompanied the General on the inspection of the guard at the airport. The Marshal exuded a kind of hearty geniality, but behind his handshake Cooper recognised the peremptory ruthlessness that makes generals and top sergeants. During White's explanation of Cooper's position, the Marshal nodded several times with just a trace of impatience. Cooper excused himself as soon as possible and returned to the lanai, wondering what could be important enough to draw his host away from the high-ranking guests at such a time.

A little later, Cooper and the General were talking when

they were joined by Colonel White. Cooper had mentioned that he was about to leave to check the hotel accommodations.

"I wouldn't worry about them, Jim," said the General, pleasantly. "Enjoy yourself! I'm sure everything has been arranged. Besides, if you leave now, you'll miss dinner."

Cooper glanced at the Colonel, who said, with a thin smile, "I evidently misunderstood, General. I was under the impression that Captain Cooper planned to eat at the Chakri Hotel . . . but we'll be glad to set an extra plate . . ."

Cooper continued to sip his gimlet, embarrassed by the obvious and unnecessary little lie. "Sir," he said to the General, "I'd rather run out to the hotel. I can eat there with Captain Mannon."

"If you like," said the General, "since Colonel White hadn't planned to have you for dinner. I'll see you later on."

Cooper, catching the General's eye, realised that the latter understood the situation perfectly and had managed to get several points across to Colonel White rather neatly; one, that Cooper was part of his personal as well as official family and, second, MAAG's first test would consist of how well arrangements had been made at the hotel.

In about a half-hour, Cooper and Mannon were on their way to Bangkok. As the vehicle approached the city limits, traffic became more dense and soon they were engulfed in a stream of Vauxhalls, Morrisises and Citroens. There were a few American cars, appearing huge and unwieldy on the narrow roadway. Handsome young Thai policemen in tight blue-green uniforms and white helmets directed the pandemonium with stylised quarter-turns and hand signals combining military precision and native grace.

As the carryall passed a massive granite shaft with four bronze soldiers crouched at the base, Mannon explained that it was the Victory Monument.

"Victory?" asked Cooper. "From what I remember, the Thais haven't had a real battle in at least two hundred years . . ."

Mannon smiled. "But this is the land of the paradox. The monument is for World War I."

"But the Thais weren't in World War I."

"Oh yes they were. Sent a contingent to Europe. Being Thais, they got there too late, of course. A day after the Armistice. But they did lose one man."

The Thai driver, not understanding the conversation but realising that the monument was under discussion, turned to Cooper, grinning widely. "Monument to Thai ancestor," he said, nodding towards the shaft and raising his hand with the middle finger extended.

In the ensuing laughter, Cooper felt he was going to like Thailand very much.

The car crossed a wide bridge and rolled down a spacious boulevard that Mannon described as "Thailand's answer to the Champs Elysées . . . Radjdammeron Boulevard . . . 'Street of the King.' " They approached a sweeping traffic circle that curved around a ring of stone pylons in the centre of which was a temple with bronze doors.

"The Monument to Democracy," said Mannon. "Built by the dictator, during World War II, while co-operating with the Japanese after having declared war on the democracies."

"I'll bite," smiled Cooper. "What's the paradox this time?"

"There isn't any, so help me," replied Mannon. "It's the truth. They probably called it the 'Monument to Co-prosperity' at the time. But now they insist that it was built to honour democracy . . ."

Cooper turned to him. "But these people had declared war . . ."

"... and can prove it," continued Mannon, "since Siam managed to be on *both* sides during the war, if you remember. And simultaneously!"

They reached the Premane parade ground that terminated the boulevard. Adjoining the great expanse of lawn was the old Royal Palace and above the whitewashed merlons of the wall Cooper saw the soaring roofs and spires of palaces and

temples, their gold leaf gleaming in the late afternoon sun. The vehicle pulled up beside the Chakri Hotel, a four-story expanse of white concrete with curving walls that followed the sweep of the boulevard.

They entered the lobby, a huge room that extended the full height of the building, its far end being a great wall of glass.

As Mannon was preparing to leave, a small man with a rumpled white suit and a shiny bald head hurried across the lobby towards them.

"Oh Christ," muttered Mannon, "I was hoping we'd escape. But you might as well get it over with."

"Who is he?"

"Mr. Blair. An American. Financial adviser to the Prime Minister. Watch out for him, he'll talk your head off!"

By that time a nasal voice had reached them. "Hello, Captain Mannon. Long time no see! How are you?"

"Fine, Mr. Blair. Fine. I'd like you to meet Captain Cooper. He's the aide to General Mason who got in today."

Cooper grasped the rough, horny hand that Blair thrust forward, and surveyed the shiny pate, the long narrow face and the quick, blinking eyes.

"General Mason's aide, eh? Nice to meet you. I'm Blair! Always glad to meet one of our own. Salt of the earth!"

He was smoking a cigarette stuck upright in a tiny black Chinese pipe and, as he vigorously pumped Cooper's hand, ashes cascaded over their grip.

"Captain Mannon given you the lowdown yet? I suppose he has," said Blair. "Well, well! Hope he's warned you of the pitfalls. Staying here?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact . . ."

"Fine! General staying here too?"

"He'll be here until he gets . . ."

"Good! Better and better! Nothing like Americans! Salt of the earth! I'll meet your General officially, of course. Probably want to get the financial picture from me. I'll do what I can, within limits, naturally." His eyes suddenly narrowed. "We

Thais have to be pretty coy, you know. Got to! With the British skulking around . . ." and he glanced over his shoulder as though he expected to see one behind him.

Mannon interrupted. "Pardon us, Mr. Blair, but we've got a few things to do . . ."

"Of course. Pardon the interruption. See you again!"

When he had gone, Cooper turned to Mannon. "Who the hell did you say that was?"

"The Thai Government employs advisers from different countries. French for law, British for commerce. Blair is for finance. You caught his references to England? He's a nut on the subject. But I understand he's pretty clever otherwise. He's a bachelor with a lot of money and he lives here at the hotel. They say he's too stingy to set himself up in a big house like the other advisers."

Up in his room, Cooper showered, changed into slacks and a sports jacket and came downstairs again. Strolling through the lobby, he noticed the hotel cocktail lounge and, on impulse, stepped inside. He found himself in a small, jewel box of a room, papered in dull gold and decorated with vignettes of Siamese dancing girls, each wearing a tall, jewelled headdress, hands outstretched and fingers bent backwards, one foot raised at right angles to the body. Soft music came from somewhere in the semi-darkness.

There were two customers, one figure sitting at a table in the rear and a girl at the bar, her slim legs wrapped around the bar stool. Cooper ordered a martini and the girl turned to look at him. He saw she was beautiful—oblique eyes, a wide, full mouth and skin the colour of gold. She wore a wine-coloured dress.

Cooper smiled at her as the bartender handed him his drink, and she smiled back, a little tentatively.

"Hi," he said.

She acknowledged his greeting with a nod and turned back to her drink.

"Excuse me," he said a moment later. "Do you know where I can eat around here?"

She turned back to him. "Hotel dining room is across lobby," she answered, in slow, meticulous English.

"Thanks." Glancing at her hand he did not see a wedding ring but he wasn't sure enough of Thai customs to draw a conclusion. After a moment she turned towards him. "You are a visitor to Thailand?" she asked, a little diffidently.

"Yes. Or I mean, no. I just arrived today but I'll be here for a while. Do you live in the hotel too?"

She smiled and shook her head. "No. I work in Ministry of Interior. It is across the square."

"My name is Cooper," he said. "Captain Cooper. I'm with MAAG."

"I am Tongchai," she replied.

"Miss Tongchai?"

She looked at him for a moment, her eyes taking in the crew cut, tanned face and grey eyes. Then she smiled and put down her glass.

"Miss Tongchai."

"Would you join me in a drink?" he asked.

"Thank you, but I must go now." She glanced at her watch and then picked up her handbag. As she rose to go he saw that her figure was breathtaking.

"Do you come in here often?" he asked, hoping to keep her there for a few more moments.

"Sometimes," she said.

"Maybe I'll see you here again?"

She shrugged and smiled and then walked out of the lounge. He finished his drink quickly and was ready to leave when the figure seated in the darkness rose and came towards him. It was Mr. Blair. "Hi, young fella," he said, his plangent voice cutting across the soft music. "Hate to butt in, but there's something you ought to know."

Cooper stopped when Blair ~~came over~~ Blair's voice

dropped. "I hate busybodies! But you're new here. You'll have to watch your step."

"Why?"

The economist glanced around the empty bar. "Can't be too careful in Bangkok," he muttered. "All kinds of characters around. Especially here in the hotel. And you're military, too!"

"Are you referring to the young lady who just left?"

Blair shook his head. "Don't know her. But other girls come in. Beautiful! Sexy! Dangerous! Mata Haris! Every one of them."

"Thanks for the warning, Mr. Blair."

"Nothing at all! Just want to be sure that none of my boys get into trouble," he said, and, chuckling to himself, he withdrew to his table.

Cooper continued into the lobby. "My boys," he thought. "Jesus Christ!"

The dining room of the Chakri was a two-story affair. It had a terrace that overlooked the Premane parade ground. Seating himself, Cooper studied the menu and ordered the *Poule Farci*, which turned out to be excellent. When the iced tea was brought in, it had been sugared. Imperiously, he called for the waiter. "Look," he said, slipping back to his Japanese occupation manner. "There's *sugar* in the iced tea!"

"No like sugar in iced tea?"

He looked up at the smiling, unperturbed waiter. "No, I don't."

"Sorry," said the waiter, pleasantly. "Maybe little sugar will not hurt you. You try! Next time, no sugar, sah!"

The waiter had left and Cooper was drinking the tea before he quite realised what had happened. Never before had an oriental waiter answered a complaint of his with aplomb and logic. He remembered how often he had taken deliberate advantage of the sensitive, volatile nature of the Japanese and the Malaysians. Maybe Mannon was wrong, he reflected. There might be a lot to be said for "Mai Ben Rai."

The lobby, now glowing in light from great glass globes suspended from the ceiling on brass chains, was crowded with guests awaiting the airport taxi. Cooper, on his way upstairs, moved among Japanese businessmen, servicemen of various nations, and Indians, turbaned in brilliant green or red, their women wrapped in diaphanous saris.

Back in his room he stepped out on the balcony. Across the klong, glowing in silver beauty under the immense bowl of stars, was the royal palace of the King of Siam. For some reason, Cooper wished his grandfather were standing beside him—Gramp, the austere old Irishman who in a lifetime of farming had never lost his insatiable thirst for knowledge of the world beyond New England. For years he had collected books—old, second-hand volumes were all he could afford—until they overflowed the bookshelves of his bedroom and piled up on the floor despite Grandma's sniffed disapproval. Jim's warmest childhood memories were of the hours he spent in Gramp's room, swallowing indiscriminately gobs of Proust and Maugham, Dickens and Bromfield, Thomas Mann and Richard Halliburton. Through Halliburton's romantic eyes he saw the great wide world that encompassed Tokyo and Lhasa, Samarkand and Istanbul. In musty, dog-eared volumes he met Charlus and Albertine, Annie Sprague and Betsy Trotwood, Sylvestre Bonnard, Sadie Thompson, Hans Castorp, Huckleberry Finn and Uriah Heep, all in wild and wonderful confusion. Sometimes, lying on his stomach with a book propped open before him, he would hear the sound of music from the parlour where his grandmother, who had once sung in opera—a volatile old lady smelling deliciously of perfume and, occasionally, bourbon—would render "Pace, Pace Mio Dio" or the "Habañera" in a somewhat shrill voice abetted by a thunderous piano accompaniment.

Jim always hated to leave his grandparents' fascinating world for his own solid and excruciatingly dull house where, occasionally, he would find his father, a withdrawn man who worked for the railway with a kind of terrible compulsion—

never a holiday or even a day off—as though grateful for the chance to escape the sterile confines of home. He could hear his mother's scornful voice now . . . “Wanted to be an actor,” she would say of her spouse in moments of bitterness. “The theatre! As though he could support a family on the stage!” Her own family was hard-working, no-nonsense German stock who worked in machine-tool factories and owned ugly utilitarian bungalows.

When Jim was ready for high school she had announced that if he went to college he must study law or medicine—“something with a solid future.” But Gramp's books had opened too many magic casements and Jim, despising “something with a solid future” had settled for bookkeeping, type-writing and stenography, to escape her censure until the day when he would be free to decide what he really wanted.

At nineteen, in a moment of divination, he had talked his parents into letting him go to Chicago. There he found a job in advertising and soon was studying philosophy and history at the University of Chicago at night. It was in Chicago that he had met Iris Mehaffey, who played the piano in a cocktail lounge, and in a wild burst of infatuation they were married. It was from Chicago that he had gone into the Army . . . as a private . . . and the volatile Iris had sent him a “Dear John” in Korea a year later.

In Korea, he had received a battlefield commission. Home on leave, his mother had outlined his future. “And now,” she had said, “you can get out of the Army and settle down. Get yourself a nice little car and a nice little job . . . and be happy.” But this time he was able to smile at her naïveté. He had come to realise that remaining in the Army was, paradoxically, his only way of staying free.

On the balcony of the hotel, Cooper could hear the sounds of motorcars and samlors and the clack of wooden slippers on the pavement below him. The air was filled with the scent of the East and he felt a sudden urge to go downstairs and walk the dark streets. He knew that adventures of all kinds would

be waiting. Prudently he reminded himself that he was a general's aide and, after all, this was his first night in Bangkok. There would be other nights . . . many others.

Stepping back into the room he found a bottle of bourbon in his Valpac and poured himself a drink.

"To Thailand . . . and a beautiful girl called Tongchai," he said aloud to the glowing night.

3

The next morning when Cooper arrived downstairs at the hotel restaurant, General and Mrs. Mason were already seated at a table near the terrace in the bright sunshine. They had been served breakfast; eggs, thick strips of Siamese bacon and mangosteen.

"Sorry you weren't able to be with us last night, Jim," said Mrs. Mason, pleasantly. "The dinner was really nice."

Cooper smiled. "I'm sorry too."

All three knew about Colonel White's arrangements, but in a comfortable family way the subject was tacitly dismissed. Mrs. Mason remarked that their room was very nice but that they should start looking around for a house. "Mrs. White was telling me about the official calls I'll have to make, Jim," she continued. "There are about six or seven."

"I'll check on them today," said Cooper. "The MAAG office should have them set up by now."

"Emily White also said there's a girl at MAAG, a Miss Patterson, I think, who handles these things."

Cooper nodded. He glanced up to see the short figure of Colonel White standing in the doorway, in white trousers and a polo shirt. "There's Colonel White," he said. "I understand, sir, that you and he were classmates at the Point."

The General and his wife glanced at one another and Cooper got the impression that perhaps relations between the

two families were not quite as close as Mrs. White had indicated the night before. The General started to say something but stopped as White reached the table.

After greetings were exchanged, the Colonel turned to Cooper.

"Sorry you couldn't make dinner last night," he said, blandly.

"I am, too, sir," said Cooper, suddenly aware of the smooth effrontery of the man.

In a few moments, leaving Mrs. Mason with her coffee, the three men departed for MAAG headquarters. Driving across town, Colonel White gave the General a rundown on Thai personalities. He discussed Field Marshal Chit, the Army commander, in great detail, including his family, background and support of the Prime Minister with Army forces. Then he traced the rise of the Admiral (after the last coup). He switched to a discussion of MAAG when the General interrupted. "I also met the Thai Air Marshal yesterday at your house. Wicharn, isn't that his name?"

"Oh . . . yes, sir."

Cooper, remembering the scene he had stumbled upon in the garden, waited to hear about the Air Marshal. The Colonel, however, continued to smoke in silence. Finally he tamped out his cigarette. "He's also Minister of Commerce, you know."

"That would make him a key figure in the present government, wouldn't it?" asked the General.

"Yes, sir. Very much so."

"Being in command of the Air Force also makes him one of the Prime Minister's chief supporters, doesn't it?"

The Colonel lit another cigarette. "I would say so, sir," he replied. "There are some who seem to think he would make a good Prime Minister himself," he said, with a slight smile.

Cooper recalled the Pentagon briefing on the Thai Air Force. During the last coup, the Air Force sank the ship on

which the Prime Minister was being held prisoner by the Navy, forcing him to leap into the river and swim to shore to save his life. At that time the Air Force had been the deciding factor in the final outcome of the upheaval.

Colonel White switched the conversation back to MAAG and was discussing up-country operations when the General looked out of the car window. Interrupting the Colonel's monologue he suddenly exclaimed, "Well, what do you know!" and nodded towards the cinema they were passing.

"Piper Laurie in *Here Comes Romance!* How about that!" he exclaimed.

The nonsensical remark had absolutely no connection whatever with the subject they were discussing. Colonel White glanced at the General as though the latter had taken leave of his senses and Cooper smiled to himself as he recognised the General's favourite trick—crude but effective—of ending conversations in which he had lost interest.

"Well, here we are," said the Colonel as the car turned off the street into a walled compound and proceeded along the driveway leading to a large mansion with a two-storied porch. It was a wooden building, profusely decorated in fancy scrollwork and latticed gazebos and yellow paint. It was flanked by a stand of wild orchid trees.

Cooper caught a glimpse of the upper porch crowded with desks and filing cabinets and sheltered by a partially lowered rattan blind. As the car approached the porte-cochere, the General glanced upwards. Two flagstuffs on the roof flew Thai and American flags. The Thai flag was on the left. The General turned to the Colonel with a questioning glance.

"The Thais prefer it that way, sir," was the answer.

"But the Thai flag is in the wrong position. This is American property, isn't it?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then why aren't the flags being flown properly?"

"When we originally moved into this building," said Colonel White, "the commander, Colonel Carpenter, had a

kind of understanding with the Thais regarding flags. This is an odd country, you'll find, sir. It's really best this way."

"Army regulations are not subject to 'kinds of understanding,' " said the General, shortly.

There was a pause as the chauffeur opened the door. Then the Colonel said, "I'll have them changed."

They alighted and proceeded through what evidently had once been the downstairs reception hall. A long bench occupied the centre of the high-ceilinged, teak-panelled room. Several women in shorts and halters were seated on it and some small children were playing in one corner.

"This is a sort of general assembly area," explained the Colonel. "It's where the dependants get their mail."

On the back veranda they passed a marble-topped counter that served as a snack bar, decorated with Coca-Cola signs and piled high with an assortment of whipped-cream cakes.

An outside stairway led to the upper-rear porch. Here a portion of the veranda had been enclosed completely with screening. The Colonel opened the door. "This will be your office, General," he said. "We call it 'the birdcage.' " Cooper saw it contained a faded oriental rug, a large teak desk and a set of wicker garden furniture upholstered in vivid cretonne.

"My office is over there," continued the Colonel, pointing to one end of the porch, "and your aide and stenographer sit at the other end."

Leaving the General in his office, Cooper walked down to his desk. Beside it, at a typing desk, sat a plump young woman with dark-brown hair who announced, "I'm Peggy Patterson."

As Cooper put his briefcase on the desk and sat down she rose and walked to his desk. She had bare legs and was wearing Siamese slippers that made a heavy, padding sound on the floor. It reminded Cooper of someone shuffling around in a bedroom.

"Nice to have you here," she said, extending her hand. He rose and shook it. "You're the Chief's secretary?"

"Well," she answered, "I'm actually the social secretary,

you might say. I keep track of all the invitations. I've done that for Colonel Carpenter and Colonel White. The procedures are quite complicated here in Thailand."

"I see," said Cooper. "How about the daily correspondence? You know, the routine work. You handle that too?"

"Oh, no," she replied. "All the regular military correspondence goes downstairs to the Adjutant's office."

"Does the commander have another secretary down there?"

She smiled sweetly. "No, Captain. But any private can handle military correspondence. Colonel White simply writes a little note and attaches it to the papers and the Adjutant adds all the military jargon to it." She waved her hand lightly but her smile faded as she caught the look on Cooper's face.

"I suppose the General . . . will want me to continue . . . my work?" she added, suddenly wary.

"I don't know. Suppose you keep on doing what you've been doing at least for the time being."

"I've got some invitations for both of you already," she said with relief and padded back to her desk. Returning, she handed Cooper a handful of thick envelopes. Cooper thumbed through them. "Do you keep a calendar of events?"

She shook her head. "That's not necessary, Captain. They're all in my head."

"Well, I need a calendar to keep track of things. I'll go ahead and draw one up and you can fill it in."

She moved closer to the desk. "All righty!" she said. Then, in a lower tone, "Captain, everyone around here calls me . . . Peg."

Cooper nodded and managed a half-smile, as she went back to her desk. She sat down, noisily inserted a piece of paper in the typewriter and leaned back in the chair. She obviously had nothing whatever to do. A moment later he saw her rise and shuffle off to what he supposed was the ladies' room.

He was busy drawing up a chart when the buzzer sounded on Miss Patterson's empty desk and he went into the bird-cage where the General was waiting with a sheaf of papers in

his hand. "I've got a secretary somewhere around here, haven't I, Jim?"

"She's in the ladies' room right now, sir. Anything I can do?"

"I'm told she's a stenographer, and I've got some dictation for her."

"I'll send her in when she gets back." At his desk again, Cooper waited about ten minutes before she returned. "You take shorthand, don't you?" he asked.

She looked startled. "Shorthand? Well, I haven't done it in some time . . ." Then, almost belligerently, "Colonel White always wrote the letters himself, or gave them to the Adjutant . . ."

"Well, General Mason is waiting for you now."

Her round face looked crumpled as she rummaged in her drawer until she found a shorthand pad. The look was intensified when she returned about a half-hour later from the General's office holding a sheaf of papers and the notebook. Working on his chart, Cooper noticed that she seated herself, took a deep breath and then disappeared again. She hadn't returned when he joined General Mason and Colonel White in a tour of the headquarters.

It was obvious that each section of the headquarters was expecting the visit. The "Ten . . . shun!" in the Army section rang out just a few seconds before the General had actually reached the door and Colonel Hawley happened to be inspecting some records in the file cabinet nearest the entrance. Cooper's impression of Hawley at the party was confirmed by the general impression he received of the Army section. Although the desks of his subordinates had an inspection-day neatness about them, his own was heaped high with reports, charts, and letters, and Cooper got the impression that nothing happened in the Army section without the personal and detailed supervision of Hawley.

In the Air Force section, Colonel Harper was waiting for the party in an aloha shirt. He was a tall, somewhat sardonic

man who obviously felt that Air Force personnel were doing MAAG a favour in being present at all.

Downstairs, Commander Enright of the Navy, rotund and ebullient, conducted the three of them through the Navy section. He evidently ran a "taut ship." Even the entrance had a white rope across it. All references were made in naval terminology, including the "main deck" to describe their own area, and the, "bridge" to designate the General's birdcage.

When the three of them finally returned to the General's office, Colonel White suggested that the briefing be held after coffee call. Back at his desk to check any phone calls, Cooper found Miss Patterson engrossed in a blue-covered pamphlet entitled "List of Diplomatic and Consular Corps in Thailand."

"I thought the General gave you some dictation," he said. "Yes," she said, looking up, "he gave me a few letters. They're being typed downstairs."

"I don't understand. Did he dictate them to you?"

She set the book down, and with a hint of exasperation in her voice said, "They were military letters, Captain, so I gave my notes to the Adjutant's office to write up. I'm not familiar with military correspondence."

At that moment the buzzer sounded on his desk. "That's for you, Captain," she said, with obvious relief.

Back in the birdcage, the General motioned him into a seat as Colonel White entered the office, followed by the section chiefs and their assistants carrying charts. Outside the birdcage, although the sun was shining, a sudden rainstorm rattled the palm fronds and brightly plumed birds swooped across the green lawn.

Cooper noted, with a touch of surprise, that none of the personnel saluted upon entering, merely nodding their heads in the General's direction and looking around for seats. Most of them were smoking and there was the business of motioning for ashtrays while they held their hands under their cigarettes.

"We'll start with the Army," said Colonel White finally, and Colonel Hawley stood up, a pointer under his arm,

and consulted a pack of three-by-five cards in his hand.

"The Royal Thai Army is organised as you see here," he began, "and the locations of the various units are as shown." For about twenty-five minutes in a Midwestern twang, he relentlessly covered every aspect of the Thai Army programme. He pointed out that the figures shown on the charts were never quite as good or bad as they appeared to be. He explained that it was difficult to get exact figures on anything. Occasionally he peered over the top of his glasses and rapped on the chart with his big hand. Cooper got the impression of a painfully honest man trying to present a true picture of a difficult situation. When he finished, he laid down the cards and took off his glasses. "Sir," he said, "I'd like to finish without notes . . . just talk off the cuff and give you a picture of the overall situation."

The General nodded.

"To start," he resumed, "I feel the key to a successful advisory programme is the advisers themselves. We have sergeants, lieutenants and captains out with the units. There are a couple of majors and lieutenant colonels stationed at various headquarters. Now it is difficult for a Thai officer to take advice from an American sergeant even though the sergeant may know ten times as much about the subject as he does. It's all a question of face. And the same thing applies to the other ranks. Any time the man being advised is senior to the adviser this problem comes up, especially since a Thai's advancement does not depend upon the American advisers but on his own superiors. His senior commanders, in many cases, know very little about our method and equipment. Any time there is a conflict between the Thai set-up—I mean parties, holidays, fairs, et cetera—and our own requirements for the maintenance of equipment, motor stables, cleaning of guns, etc., the adviser usually loses out.

"Then there's the question of the records we ask them to keep. Before MAAG came here, nobody was particularly worried if ten per cent of the command was missing at any given time.

Up-country, for instance, if a soldier's father is ill, the soldier goes home to help out in the rice paddy or do household chores. With poor communications, the commander simply assumes this is the case. In the American Army, that man would be AWOL—a serious matter. But we are comparing an American soldier who gets about ten dollars a day with a Thai who gets fifteen or twenty cents. So the term AWOL takes on a different meaning in Thailand. A ten per cent AWOL record in our Army would call for an all-out investigation.

"We also insist that equipment be maintained. But if a Thai radio or telephone isn't working, the officer just sends off a soldier to deliver the message on foot, that's all. And if it takes ten or even twenty times as long to deliver the message, then it's just a case of 'Mai Ben Rai.'"

The General interrupted. "Mai Ben Rai?"

"Yes, sir. It's a Thai expression. Means 'So what!' or something like that." The Colonel waited until the General nodded before he continued. "There's another aspect to this AWOL business too," he said. "No Thai has to worry about food or lodging. He can eat all he wants for a few ticals a day. And in a climate like this, shelter and clothing are no problem. There are no destitute Thais. So a soldier with a couple of hundred ticals in his pocket can live for weeks or even months whether he is drawing his pay or not.

"Finally, the soldier is told that MAAG is here to help guard him against Communism, of which he has had very little experience. Also, since Thailand has never been the colony of a foreign power, he doesn't hate anybody."

The Colonel paused and looked at the General. "After all this, sir," he continued, "I'd like to add that I think we're doing a bang-up job here. In spite of everything, when the Thais understand why we recommend these things, they respond well."

After the General had nodded his thanks and Hawley had reseated himself, the Air Force adviser, Colonel Harper, spoke.

His talk was in marked contrast to Hawley's. The Air Force, according to its adviser, was tops . . . pilots well-trained, air-fields excellent and general capabilities high. After the groping presentation of the Army, with constant stress on the fact that things were never quite what they appeared to be, the Air Force presentation struck Cooper as just a trifle too slick.

At the conclusion, General Mason had a question. "What percentage of the Thai Air Force planes are operable at this moment?"

The Colonel gave him a figure.

"How does that compare with American percentages for comparable units?"

"Well," answered Harper, "if we add the factors applicable to this type operation, we arrive at a figure not more than one or two per cent lower than . . ."

"What factors do you refer to?"

"Factors which compensate for operational differences inherent in a project of . . ."

"How much do these factors total up to?"

"Well, they're composed of many items, a few of them arbitrary . . ."

"What do I have to ask to get some kind of a figure?" cut in the General. During the ensuing silence both of them stared at each other. "In round figures, approximately twenty per cent, sir."

"Who determines these figures?"

There was another pause before the Colonel replied. "My office does."

"You mean that your office decides the factors to apply and also the weight each of them will carry?"

"Yes, sir," said the Colonel.

The General slapped his hand on the desk. "Thank you, Colonel," he said. The eloquent slap brought a glint of satisfaction to the eyes of the Army and Navy advisers and Cooper assumed it was the first time that a MAAG commander had penetrated the barrage of verbal flak of an Air Force briefing.

The Navy adviser, during his talk, carried informality to its limits by pausing occasionally to pick up his cigarette and puff on it. There was nothing informal, however, about his charts—beautifully executed and bristling with Navy terms. Evidently the Navy section had very close liaison with the Thai Navy and his expressions continually referred to “us.” On the subject of Marines he lowered his voice. “When the high command abolished the Marines,” he explained, “after the last attempted coup, the only way to get around that order was to call them ‘labour troops.’” He chuckled.

“I don’t quite understand you,” said the General. “Who ordered them abolished?”

“Navy headquarters.”

“Then how can a subordinate unit continue to keep troops which the high command orders disbanded?”

Commander Enright was hesitant and Colonel White spoke. “I can explain, General, just what . . .”

The General raised his hand. “I want to hear it from Commander Enright.”

Cooper noticed that when the Commander spoke again he had lost some of his volubility. “What I meant, sir, is that the Navy does want them. The order came from higher up and so, of course, the units were disbanded. But the men were transferred to other organisations such as Base Operations, et cetera and they are still available.”

“Available for what?”

“For reconstitution as Marines.”

The General sat motionless for a few moments looking at a somewhat chastened Commander who, cigarette abandoned, had drawn himself up in a posture of attention, despite his civilian clothes.

“Thank you,” said the General, finally, and the Commander took his seat. Colonel White, with forced heartiness, put a period to the session: “Well, sir, that’s the picture!”

There was a pause while the General sat, apparently wrapped in thought. “Thank you,” he said finally and, at the

dismissive note in his voice, each of them rose, saluted, and left the birdcage.

Back at his desk, Cooper called Miss Patterson over to him. "I didn't have a chance to ask you before, but just what is the AG office doing with the General's letters?"

There was an edge of impatience in her voice and she pushed back a lock of dark hair. "As I told you, I'm not familiar with Army jargon . . ."

"Is there any reason why you couldn't become familiar with 'Army jargon'?"

"Why, no . . ."

"Well, I want you to get a copy of Army Regulation Number 340-15 and familiarise yourself with military correspondence. The General's letters are not supposed to be floating around the headquarters."

She stood looking at him and he saw a flash of rebellion in her round eyes. "Yes, sir," she snapped and padded back to her desk.

At noon, Cooper went down to the snack bar and returned with the only available items—whipped-cream cake and a bottle of Coke.

During the afternoon, Miss Patterson obtained the completed letters from the Adjutant's office and Cooper took them in to General Mason, who looked them over and tossed the pile on the desk. "Miss What's-her-name," he said grimly, "isn't even close. Tell her to do them again."

When Cooper delivered the rejected letters, she was on the verge of tears. "I can't help it," she said, "I haven't used my shorthand in years. I did the best I could."

He didn't answer but turned and went downstairs to find the Adjutant. After hearing the story, Mannon leaned back in his chair. "I wondered how long it would take you to catch on. She's been getting away with this for a long time. She's paid as a stenographer but all she does is answer invitations and run errands for the brass."

"What can we do?"

"She's the only civilian in the Table of Organisation. If we send her home we lose the slot and old bureaucrat White would never stand for that!"

"But she's just plain incompetent!"

"Jim, it's easier to impeach the President than to get a civil service employee declared incompetent. So we're stuck. Her mistake was coming to the Land of the Living Dolls in the first place. Maybe I could trade her off with another MAAG. I wonder if we have a mission with the Ubangis? Boy, would she be a sensation there!"

Cooper, climbing the stairs, saw Miss Patterson waiting for him at the top. "Colonel White wants to see you," she announced with a tight smile. In front of his desk, Cooper found the Colonel in a baleful mood. "Captain," he said, "Miss Patterson has just been in to see me. Perhaps I should have explained her situation before now. She's a good, loyal worker and she's been here quite a while. Her shorthand isn't too hot and she'll need a few days to brush up on it. Meantime Mannon's office downstairs can handle military correspondence while she handles protocol. Believe me, that's a big job in itself."

"But the General isn't satisfied," said Cooper. "Evidently she can't take shorthand at all and his letters shouldn't be downstairs..."

"At the cocktail party, the General was telling me that you are practically a court reporter," replied the Colonel. "Couldn't you help out for a few days until Miss Patterson gets her feet on the ground...?"

"But surely, sir, there are other stenographers around the headquarters..."

"... the General would have to take one away from some section chief..."

Cooper looked at him for a moment. You son of a bitch, he thought. "Yes, sir, I suppose I could help out for a few days," he said aloud and then went back to his desk where he sat

down and lit a cigarette. He knew that the matter could be settled by walking to the birdcage but after that briefing he realised the General would have a tough enough time with the section chiefs without borrowing one of their employees.

Miss Patterson was standing before him holding a handful of invitations.

"Here are the invites for the formal dinner at Government House," she said. "They're for General and Mrs. Mason, and there's one for you." She handed him three thick cardboards, each bearing the seal of the Prime Minister engraved in gold. Cooper looked them over. "Has anything come in yet regarding a conference on military affairs?"

"No sir. These are strictly social."

At the close of the day, Cooper finally got Miss Patterson to make up a list of calls for Mrs. Mason to make on the wives of the various government officials. He also explained to the General that, for the time being, he would handle the correspondence himself.

4

Cooper's first few days in Bangkok were a succession of fascinating impressions . . . glittering temples . . . teeming klongs . . . the smell of charcoal and incense . . . grave, saffron-robed priests with begging bowls . . . Chinese shops blazing with colours, textures and lights . . . the lonely sound of temple bells in the night . . . the howling of pye dogs at the moon. But the most intriguing experience of all had been those few moments in the Chakri Hotel bar on the day of his arrival when he had met the Thai girl called Tongchai. Somehow Cooper could not forget the brief encounter and each night he stopped at the cocktail lounge, hoping to catch a glimpse of the lithe body, the diffident smile and the soft, oblique eyes.

He also discovered the Nielson Hayes Library where the files

of musty books on Siam, written by missionaries and traders long since dead, reminded him of Gramp's room. The General smiled as his aide climbed into the sedan with an armload of crumbling volumes.

That evening Cooper sat in his room looking over his collection. The soft strains of "Falling Rain" on the radio reminded him that the King of Thailand was also a songwriter. Its sensual lilt matched his mood. From the street below came the faint sounds of the endless traffic on the boulevard, and the scent of the East drifted through the window. Somehow he could not whip up any interest in the Jesuits' visit to Siam in 1688. Finally he closed his book and wandered downstairs. The tall Sikh doorman, his long black beard folded neatly in a net bag suspended under his chin, waited patiently for Cooper to make up his mind what he wanted to do.

Directly in front of the doorway, leaning against his samlor, stood a young Thai in a white T shirt and blue shorts. Cooper had not ridden in one of these vehicles before and, on impulse, he went down to inspect the tricycle with the passenger seat in the rear. The samlor boy grinned proudly and nodded towards his brilliant blue vehicle trimmed profusely in chromium. "You want good samlor?" he asked. "I think maybe you go out for big night, sah?"

"Could be," Cooper replied, climbing into the seat. "Take me to New Road."

The husky Thai jumped on the seat and with a thrust of bronze thighs the samlor shot forward. Riding in the fragile vehicle which responded so subtly to every movement of the driver was a new experience for Cooper and, for the first few moments, it appeared to be a hazardous one as the samlor lurched into the heavy traffic, barely missing a speeding Vauxhall.

They passed the high walls of the Royal Palace in front of which old women crouched over little piles of fruit or cooked rice on dancing paraffin flames.

Ignoring the perils of traffic, the driver turned his head. "I am Champen," he announced. "I work at Chakri Hotel. You come couple days ago."

"That's right," said Cooper.

"I know many ferungs."

"Ferungs?"

"Thai word for foreign peoples . . ."

Champen turned his head back just in time to swerve the samlor out of the path of an oncoming bus. A short while later he called out, "I take short cut," and swung off the main artery down a back road where dogs slunk around corners and women squatted in front of braziers cooking supper. An occasional open door revealed a red-and-gold altar far back in a dark room.

The samlor turned sharply into a narrow alley and was suddenly engulfed in a swirl of sound and colour. Shrill music reverberated from the house fronts as a platform, borne on the backs of sweating, smiling Thais lurched down the alleyway. On it, rising from a great mound of frangipani and mali blossoms was a golden Buddha, one arm raised in benediction. Behind him, a reredos, inlaid with thousands of tiny mirrors, glittered in the dancing candlelight.

The slowly moving tide of chanting Thais flowed past the samlor, crowded against a wall. When the golden splendour had swayed by, Champen continued on his way, turning the samlor back into the bright lights and bustle of New Road. Although it was almost ten o'clock at night, the jewellery and silver shops were ablaze with lights. Even the bookstalls were open for business.

"Where you want to go?" he asked.

While Cooper was making up his mind, the Thai announced, "Maybe better you go Oriental Hotel. There is Bamboo Bar. Very nice." Cooper nodded and Champen swung the samlor down another alley leading towards a river, on the bank of which stood the Oriental. As they pulled up before the entrance, Champen said, "I wait for you."

Cooper shook his head. "I don't know how long I'll be here. I don't want you to lose money waiting around for me."

"Never mind," said Champen. "I be around," and he pedalled off.

Cooper entered a small, shabby lobby, panelled in the lush Edwardian manner. Although a forest of punkhas churned overhead, they created little relief for the crowd of tourists, Indians, Siamese men and women, the latter in Thai silk evening dress, who milled around beneath. Cooper finally spied the Bamboo Bar across the room. It, too, he found, was small, with walls of split bamboo and a huge plate-glass window which overlooked the river. On the far side of the mighty stream he could see a silver filigree temple, looking like a stage set, which he recognised as the Temple of the Dawn. Music of the five-piece dance orchestra rose above the din of voices as he wove his way through the room to the bar where he ordered a gimlet. The bartender hesitated and then said, politely, "Sir, you are required to wear a tie."

"Sorry. I didn't know," replied Cooper and turned to leave.

"But never mind!" The bartender grinned broadly and he reached under the bar to produce a bright-green silk tie with the words "Bamboo Bar" embroidered down the front. Cooper moved for his wallet, but the bartender laughed. "No charge! Compliments of the Bamboo Bar!" As he affixed the tie, Cooper noted that several men in dinner jackets had removed their black bow ties and substituted the "Bamboo Bar" four-in-hand.

Surveying the room, Cooper found it to be an interesting conglomeration. Several parties which he assumed to be ambassadorial were seated side by side with American enlisted men in uniform. European tourists were wedged between Japanese businessmen. A group of individuals who looked like seamen were seated at the same table with what appeared to be well-to-do British or Swiss businessmen.

Cooper ordered a gimlet and when the bartender slid the drink across the bar and said "Fifteen baht," Cooper hesitated

at the unfamiliar term. "Excuse me," said a voice beside him. "'Baht' and 'tical' are the same thing. He means fifteen ticals." The speaker, a man in his early thirties, had the typical Thai face; bronzed, wide-planed and rather handsome. Cooper paid the bartender and turned back to the stranger. "I thought I understood Thai currency," he said, "but nobody has used the word 'baht' before."

"You are new in Bangkok?" asked the man, his eyes on the tie. Cooper fingered the gaudy silk and smiled. "I suppose that's obvious."

"American?"

Cooper nodded. "MAAG."

"It is nice to meet an American again," said the Thai. "I have known many of them in Berlin occupation."

"Berlin?" asked Cooper.

"I was there during the whole war."

"The whole war—!" said Cooper. "That explains your German accent. But how about the big bombing raids? I didn't think anybody could live through *all* of them!"

The Thai shrugged. "A few of us were lucky." He turned around to face Cooper and extended his hand. "My name is Prasert Songgram."

They began to talk, casually exchanging biographical information. Cooper learned that Prasert was, at present, an official in the Ministry of Commerce. As an exchange student, he had been educated at the University of Berlin and had taken a degree in philosophy. Unmarried, he lived not far from Cooper's hotel. Prasert explained that, as a student in Berlin, he had been caught there during the war. After the fall of the city he, along with the surviving Germans, had awaited with dread the Russian advance and later hailed the arrival of Allied troops into the city.

Cooper found it hard to imagine that this fine-boned Thai with the quick, handsome smile, had lived through that holocaust and could sit discussing it so casually. Perhaps, he reflected, only the men who can do so manage to survive, after all.

After a round of drinks, Prasert pointed out various notables, starting with the French Ambassador's party at a nearby table. Among the guests sat a woman, about eighty years old, with heavily lidded eyes and a look of distinction about her finely chiselled face. Her red hair was piled on top of her head and she was draped in gold lamé. Prasert identified her as the Princess Rangsarit, wife of the Siamese Ambassador to Russia in the Czarist days.

"But she doesn't look Siamese . . .," said Cooper.

"She is Russian. The Prince married her when he was in St. Petersburg. He died about thirty years ago but she still lives in Bangkok, alone in the palace."

Prasert identified other people in the room but somehow the aged Princess had caught Cooper's fancy. He found himself glancing at her from time to time, as one would view some priceless old reliquary.

When the crowd thinned out they were able to secure a table. Over the ruby glow of a tiny lamp, Prasert queried him about MAAG and Cooper mentioned the imminent Government House reception.

"At Government House," said Prasert, "you will see official Thailand at its best. You will be impressed, I think."

"Should I?"

Prasert toyed with the stem of his glass. "Perhaps it is better that you should be. Because there is a great deal more to my country than quaint, lovable people who bathe in the klong and dance the Ramwong and make silver cigarette cases for tourists."

"Of course. I've bought some books already and I intend to find out all I can about your country."

"I am glad to hear this," said Prasert. "I love my country and I like Americans. But you people always make everything simple—like the postal card with the bright colours. Very pretty but sometimes very wrong."

Cooper leaned forward, interested. "Wrong in what way?"

"Well," said Prasert, "you are now supporting a dictator-

ship, for instance. Perhaps you think you have no choice. But if some day we should change all that, you must understand and not get excited and angry and call us Communists."

"I'm sure we know better than that," said Cooper.

"You have done it before in other countries," replied Prasert. "When you learn about Thailand you will find that the Thais know very little about Communism. Until 1932 we had an absolute monarchy. My father was part of that court and someday I would like to tell you what it was like. Then the King was deposed by Pridi."

"I've heard of him," said Cooper. "He freed the Thais but then he was thrown out of office by the Army. Now I understand he is a Communist, hiding somewhere in China. So evidently the Army was right."

Prasert shook his head. "Pridi was not always a Communist. He was a brave man. Using only a few men he overthrew a king. Remember, the people did not rise up—it was not that kind of a revolution. A few dreamers wanted a kind of Siam where people did not crawl on their hands and knees in the presence of the ruler. Surely an American can understand that.

"After the danger was over, and the King was gone, then the Army moved in and said that Pridi and his men were incompetent. Of course they were. It is a difficult job to govern a country and maybe all dreamers are incompetent when they are learning. The Army said the people were not ready for a revolution. Who is ever ready for one?"

"You sound like a dreamer yourself," said Cooper, smiling. He had a sense of well-being, induced by the surroundings, and was enjoying the history lesson, which seemed remote despite the mounting intensity in Prasert's speech. He ordered another drink.

When the waiter had left, Prasert said, "No, I am not like my father. But from him I have learned what it was like in those days. Pridi had the dream once and we have never forgotten it."

"Are you in favour of Pridi's return?"

"Of course not," said Prasert. "In despair he sold himself into tyranny. Now he is lost. But the Army is clever. Anybody who wants to help Thailand is a 'Communist.' Or they are 'one of Pridi's men.' It works very well for them. They fool your government all the time."

The waiter brought the drinks and they sat listening to the music and watching the people around them. A tall, corpulent man sporting a full beard strode into the bar accompanied by a middle-aged European woman with a mass of blonde hair.

As they seated themselves at a reserved table, Cooper turned to Prasert with an inquiring glance. "That man," said the Thai, "is involved in a great scandal. He was captain of a ship that belonged to a Scandinavian company. When it stopped here to refuel, a group of men from China offered to buy his cargo, which was some kind of ore. He dismissed the crew and sold the ship and the cargo to the Chinese for more than a million American dollars!"

The couple rose as the orchestra began to play another number. It was "China Night," which Cooper thought was quite appropriate. He and Prasert watched them moving sedately about on the dance floor.

"And the woman?" he asked.

"She is the proprietress of the hotel," said Prasert. "He is a favoured guest . . . in the Royal Suite."

"But what will happen when the law catches up with him?"

"He is a European and his country's laws cannot touch him as long as he remains in Thailand."

Cooper watched the couple again, fascinated at the sight of the man who could perpetrate so audacious a crime.

"Don't worry," said Prasert, "the Thai Government knows of all this. He is therefore, as you say, very vulnerable. You can imagine who will end up with all the money!"

Several men passed their table and they nodded to Prasert. When they had gone the Thai remarked that they were old friends from the British Embassy whom he had known for a long time.

"A long time?" asked Cooper. "Don't they rotate every few years?"

Prasert shook his head. "The British are wiser than you Americans. Your people never stay long enough to learn about us. But the British are clever. They send a man to the Far East for four years. Then to another post, but always in the East. In twenty years he will be a high-ranking official and by that time he has spent all his life in the East and he understands us. But you people! It will take six months to understand us, one year to work. Then for six months you get ready to go home. The man who replaces you goes through the same thing. So we have time to adjust to each of you!"

Cooper finished his drink. "I'd like to stay right here for twenty years," he said. "But we have a point. After a man has been in the East for twenty years, we feel he's no longer an American. He has become an 'old China hand' as they used to say. He understands the East all right, but he has lost touch with America."

"This is bad?"

"We think so."

Prasert smiled. "In Thailand we find there are always enough bureaucrats in the home office to handle the 'old European hands.'"

The orchestra began a Siamese Lamwong and they sat back watching the couples circle about the dance floor, upraised hands curving sinuously and bodies swaying close to each other, never quite touching. Cooper noticed that the Siamese, young or old, moved with ineffable grace. Even the ferungs were able to imitate them without too great a loss of dignity.

A middle-aged Thai couple circled close to their table and Cooper recognised them. "That's Admiral Koson of the Thai Navy and his wife," he said to Prasert. In spite of their age and girth, the couple danced with a kind of old-fashioned grace and elegance that evoked another age. Both nodded to

him as they passed the table and Cooper was surprised to feel a lump in his throat.

"The Admiral got his job after the last coup because he's dependable," said Prasert, a shade scornfully. "But I understand he is able to get much naval equipment from your MAAG . . ."

Cooper broke in vehemently. "It's not a *personal* matter! The Navy gets equipment based on need. Who else can we send it to but the men in power? They are your government . . ."

"For today," said Prasert, quietly. "Tomorrow tanks can roll down the street and capture the post office and the radio station and there will be another group in power. Because our government does not have the dream behind it."

"Does any government really have 'the dream' behind it?"

Prasert set down his glass. "When your Army came to Berlin I was living in an air-raid shelter with some Germans. We were very hungry and one old woman, who had once been rich, went back to her house where she had hidden four cans of *pâté de foie gras*. The house was filled with American soldiers and they let her look in the cellar. But she could not find the cans. Because they were Americans, she was not afraid to talk to the Sergeant. He listened and he asked the cook, 'Did you find the cans?' and the cook said, 'Yes I did and to the hell with her.' Then the Sergeant said, 'Our regulations are that Germans are entitled to keep their own food. Take her to the kitchen and give her four cans of anything she wants from the mess.' She brought back what do you call it . . . the Spam . . . and we ate meat. It was the first time in many months. Now to you this is a very small thing and you can laugh if you like. But that night we had supper because the American people wanted us to eat."

Their attention was diverted to the French Ambassador's table, where it was apparent that the Princess was preparing to leave. Standing behind her was a Thai in black-frogged livery who gave her his arm as she rose and bade goodnight to the

party. Then, grasping a silver cane in her gnarled hand which glittered with a massive diamond ring, she moved through the lounge slowly, the patrons making way for her and Thai waitresses curtsying at the sight of the stately figure with the red hair and flashing jewels.

"Would you like to meet her?" asked Prasert.

"Very much."

"I will see if it is possible."

Cooper looked at his watch. "God, it's late. I've got to go!" The two of them rose. "It's been very interesting, Prasert," said Cooper. "I live at the Chakri. Any time you're in the neighbourhood, drop in."

Prasert nodded. "You are the first American I have met to whom I can talk easily," he said. "I hope to see you again. Someday I want to see America and your Wild West and Hollywood and California."

They walked through the lobby to the entrance where they shook hands. Prasert said, "We have a nice beach—at Bang San—about fifty miles from here. Would you like to go there some time?"

"I would," said Cooper. "Maybe some weekend . . ."

As Prasert disappeared in the darkness, a high, old-fashioned Rolls-Royce silently drew up before the door and the old lady who had been pointed out as a Princess appeared in the entrance. She hesitated at the step. "May I help you?" asked Cooper.

"Thank you, young man," she said, with a trace of accent, and extended her hand. Carefully they descended to the car. She weighed almost nothing and in her brittle, iridescent way she reminded him of an immensely old actress leaving the theatre after a farewell performance. Seated in her car she bowed slightly and the chauffeur shut the door.

As the vehicle drove off, Champen and his samlor wheeled into sight. The trip back to the Chakri took only twenty minutes in the deserted streets and Cooper gave Champen a tip that he knew was generous even for an American. Walking

through the lobby he heard music in the cocktail lounge and, hoping to see Tongchai, he stepped inside.

"Well, well! My military adviser! How are you, Captain!" Cooper was startled to find Mr. Blair at his elbow, extending his hand. He shook it, taking care to keep the handshake out of range of the ash from Blair's pipe. "Had dinner with your General and his lady tonight! Wonderful people! Salt of the earth!"

"I didn't realise you knew . . ."

"Introduced myself! And Mrs. Mason, fine woman! Don't come any better. Invited them in here for a liqueur. They couldn't come, though. Mrs. Mason. Had a headache. Went right upstairs!"

Cooper looked around vainly for Tongchai and was turning to leave when he saw Captain Mannon at one of the rear tables sitting with a woman . . . not a Thai. Deciding that he would discreetly leave, he had started out the door when Mannon looked up. Seeing him he quickly walked over. "Hi Jim," he said, "if you're not going to bed right away, mind if I drop up?"

"Come right along, but . . ." Cooper glanced towards the table.

"She's leaving. Got anything to drink?"

"Bourbon."

"Good enough. See you in ten minutes."

Hanging up his shirt, Cooper caught a faint whiff of Joy on the sleeve. The next time he saw Prasert he would press for an introduction to the intriguing old woman with the red hair and diamonds.

In about ten minutes, Mannon was sprawled in one of his chairs, a bourbon and water in his hand. "Jim," he said, after tasting the drink, "about tonight . . ."

"You don't have to explain anything to me, Frank."

"I know that. But I'm going to. Not because you're the aide but because I want to. I get a charge out of the way you've been acting at headquarters since you got here. It's got

most of those clowns completely baffled. Maybe you don't realise just how unlike an aide you are. How in hell did you ever get the job, anyway? You're the first one I've known who wasn't a simple-minded jerk!"

"What do you mean?"

"I've always figured that an aide is a reflection of the man he works for. So Mason must be a damned good man. Discerning, too."

Cooper gestured in embarrassment.

"I'm not saying this to make points, Jim. But I can't help noticing things. For instance, you take a lot of crap around MAAG, especially from White and Patterson. You don't have to; you could kick both of them square in the teeth and get away with it. What's the pitch?"

"The Old Man's got a lot on his mind right now. Besides, those two don't really bother me."

Mannon smiled and took a drink. "You're too much!" He set down his glass. "But I want to tell you about tonight. The woman I was with is the wife of one of the officers who took off on a trip tonight. She asked me to stop in here for a drink with her. When you saw us, you probably thought we were building up to a roll in the hay. Well, we weren't. I drove to the airport with her and her husband, that's all. If I wanted to, I suppose I could shack up with a lot of chicks around here."

Cooper, looking at the handsome Irishman, believed him.

"It's not because I don't want to," continued Mannon, "but if I ever started, God what a mess I'd be in." He looked up at Cooper. "Do you know what this woman wanted tonight?"

Cooper shook his head.

"She wanted to talk. Talk! For Christ's sake!"

"About what?"

"Anything. She wanted somebody to sit across from her in a bar, and light her cigarette and admire her hairdo and her new dress, and laugh and maybe tell her a risqué story. Jesus! I can't imagine what's wrong with her husband. I've been

married and I'll guaran-goddamn-tee you that my wife never felt like that!"

"I didn't know you'd been . . ."

"She died. When I was in Korea."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

"Jim, you know what an adjutant's job is. I'm the one they complain to about their servants, rental allowances, travel pay. And sometimes—it would surprise you how often—I'm a kind of Miss Lonelyhearts. I don't know what's the matter with their husbands . . ."

"Probably all wrapped up in their jobs," said Cooper.

"Balls! What's so important about our jobs in peacetime. Or even in cold-war time?"

"What do you think it is, then?"

"They're just second-rate. That's all. They're so goddamned frightened of everything—jobs, promotions, efficiency reports, their future—everything scares the hell out of them. What can you do with people like that?"

"Who scares them? The General?"

Mannon shook his head. "A little, maybe, but that's not the real reason. Maybe the whole organisation is too big for them. You'll have to admit it doesn't get the General down. He's on hand every morning at eight, works all day and then at four-thirty he's gone. You can't imagine what it used to be like with White hanging around two or three hours every night, piddling here and there, shuffling papers over and over . . . God!"

They sat silently for a moment, sipping their drinks.

"Let's face it, Jim," continued Mannon, "nobody really likes adjutants or aides. Me, because I know too much about them and their shenanigans. You, because you're too close to the throne for their peace of mind. They judge us by what they'd do in the same job. That's a laugh!"

Mannon stirred his drink with a finger. "I'm tired of this set-up anyway. I'd like to go up-country as an adviser. I like Thais, and I have a theory about MAAGs. They ought to send

some kind of a genius to each of these countries. Somebody who is honestly interested in these people and who'll study them and come up with a plan as to what assistance they'll need. Now all we do is throw guns and planes and tanks at them."

"You know that could never be done!"

"That doesn't keep me from thinking about it."

Cooper got up and mixed another drink.

"How's your love life doing, Jim?" asked Mannon, accepting a glass. "Found a girl friend yet?"

Cooper shook his head. "I met one the first day I got here, named Tongchai. Somehow I can't get her out of my mind. An absolute dish. But she hasn't been around since . . ."

"One night stand, maybe?"

"Hell no! At least I don't think so."

"What are you doing about it? Just waiting around?"

Cooper shrugged.

"If you're satisfied to pay for it, there's the Hoi Chien Lau. They've got a whole stable of dancing girls and I understand that some of them can be talked into going home. I've never been there because I don't like buying rolls of tickets to dance. The idea bugs me. I just don't dig it."

They sat for a while in silence, and then Mannon stood up. "I've got to shove off. See you around, Jim. And let me know the day you start kicking some teeth in. I want to help."

"I'll do that, Frank."

After Mannon had gone, Cooper undressed and got into bed. As he reached for the light switch he noticed a message propped up on the night table. He was surprised, as his boy-sen usually waited up to deliver any messages to him personally.

He opened the envelope and read, "Remember, you're going with the General and me tomorrow night to Government House."

It was signed Eleanor Mason.

As the General's Cadillac turned into the driveway that led to the porte-cochere of Government House, Cooper received his first look at the remarkable structure which, bathed in the dazzling glare of concealed floodlights, resembled some enchanted palace in a fairy tale. A huge Venetian-Gothic edifice, its pointed tracery windows and great Byzantine domes gave it a curiously ecclesiastical appearance.

The column of shiny limousines crunched along the gravel drive as Thai sentries in white leggings and chromium-plated helmets presented arms. One by one the cars halted under the marble canopy and Thai aides, in white uniforms laced with gold braid, opened doors and extended their arms to the descending passengers who then proceeded up the wide, shallow stairs.

When their car finally arrived at the entrance, General and Mrs. Mason, followed by Cooper, stepped out. Mrs. Mason gave a wifely glance at the General's white mess jacket and the medals pinned on the lapel; then, pausing to pick up the skirt of her turquoise evening dress, she linked her arm in his and they ascended the stairs together.

The officer at the head of the stairs introduced himself as General Kawee, Chief of Protocol, and directed them into a two-storied reception hall where the receiving line was in position. The Prime Minister stood first in line wearing a white uniform looped with gold braid and studded by massive sunburst medals. He was slight and dark, his fine features composed and smiling as he greeted the guests by touching his fingertips together and inclining his head. In the case of his European and American guests, he also shook hands.

Beside him stood his wife, the Lady Titana, her black hair caught up in a gold net and her brocaded Thai silk gown

clinging to her plump figure. Cooper estimated that she was about fifty years old. As he shook her hand, her quick black eyes flickered over him and a smile accentuated the delicate structure of her face.

Above the strains of the Thai Army Band, playing softly in an adjoining salon, Cooper could hear the Prime Minister switch from Thai to French as he welcomed the French Ambassador.

Standing beside the Lady Titana was the old man with the parchment-like face whom he remembered seeing at the airport and who was introduced as Field Marshal Chit, Commander of the Thai Army. Also in line were Air Marshal Wicharn and, finally, the rotund Admiral of the Fleet, whom Cooper had seen dancing the Ramwong at the Bamboo Bar.

Leaving the receiving line, Cooper joined the members of the diplomatic corps and the military guests who, cocktails in hand, were chatting and exchanging greetings. He noticed that, despite the banter and light laughter, guests kept the line under close observation and no nuance was lost. The undercurrent of vigilance indicated that Government House receptions were, in some as yet undefinable way, deadly serious affairs.

A three-man team, consisting of two cameramen and an assistant wielding a bank of portable floodlights, also played a part in the diplomatic drama under the discreet direction of General Kawee, the Protocol Chief. Moving about the hall they paused occasionally, in a burst of flashbulbs, to catch a particular group or individual. A few of the guests, including the British Ambassador and General and Mrs. Mason, got the full treatment—blinding floodlights and the film cameraman advancing towards them, peering through the viewfinder of his camera.

As Cooper watched the camera crew, his elbow was grasped by a tall young man with glasses who introduced himself as "Mad Mike" Murphy's aide. "I'm Halloran," he said. "I saw you at the airport when you arrived but I haven't had a

chance to talk to you. How do you find the land of 'Mai Ben Rai'? Got you down yet?"

Cooper learned that Halloran was a Baltimore lawyer who had accepted a reserve commission in order to accompany the Ambassador to Thailand. He had been in the country over a year.

When the photographic team again went into action, Halloran nudged Cooper. "Five to one there's no film in that camera! Since I've been here I've never seen a foot of film shot at any of these blasts!"

They agreed, however, that film or not, the crew put on a spectacular performance. Then, as they made their way towards the chart which showed the seating arrangements for dinner, Halloran asked, "How would you like a palace like this for your birthday?"

"Birthday? I don't get it."

"Didn't you know that Government House was originally a palace? Built by Rama VI for one of his boy friends?"

"Good God!" said Cooper and he remembered seeing a photograph of Rama VI, a small stocky man with a round, swarthy face, surrounded by handsome young Siamese, his eyes holding the same voracious, uneasy awareness that mars the faces of certain middle-aged men who sit alone in bus terminals at midnight . . .

Studying the diagram, Cooper found he was seated near Halloran at one end of the U and would escort a Mme. Gauthier to dinner. "I've met her," said Halloran, looking over Cooper's shoulder at the chart. "Her name's not Marguerite and she doesn't cough and I wasn't in a position to check on any other similarities. She's in the UN Secretariat." He pointed out a small, very distinguished-looking French woman to whom Cooper introduced himself a few moments before moving into the state dining room.

It was a large room with a groined ceiling and walls covered in gold damask. Cooper glanced at several large paintings of fighting elephants. Their seats were near one end of the long,

curved table draped with white damask, down the centre of which swirled a length of crimson silk. Standing on the silk were ormolu candelabra and epergnes heaped with mangoes and grapes.

Mme. Gauthier's English enchanted Cooper, and so did her smooth white shoulders and challenging eyes. She was intrigued by the military personnel present. "I cannot understand this passion which you Americans have for the initial . . . now you must tell me what is this you call the 'emdap' and what is the 'maag' . . ."

Cooper explained that MDAP stood for Military Defence Assistance Programme, which was the legal basis for giving military assistance to foreign countries. And MAAG meant Military Assistance Advisory Group, the unit sent to the individual countries to support the operation of the programme.

They sat down to the soup. This was followed by Kapong with Sauce Cardinale, and the waiters silently moved forward to pour the wine. Mme. Gauthier smiled at Cooper and nodded towards the wine glasses. "Five-wine dinners are for heads of states," she said. "The General should be flattered!"

While waiting for the entrée, Cooper was admiring the floral arrangements tucked in the red silk. They were intricate arrangements of several different blossoms on one stem. "What kind of flower do you suppose it is?" he asked his partner. Before she could answer, a Thai colonel across the table said, "But it is not a flower at all. It is, as you say, made by the hand. On small wires. You see?" He handed Cooper one of the arrangements. "Here. Take it home. Souvenir!"

Cooper, nonplussed for the moment, smiled and tucked it in his cummerbund, intending to put it back on the table when he had the chance.

Although all the waiters wore the same fancy livery, some of them looked vaguely familiar to Cooper. He glanced up as one passed by holding a tray and he recognised the tall waiter from the Chakri dining room. The waiter nodded and smiled.

Evidently Government House dinners required experienced help from Bangkok hotels. Cooper noted that not only were they efficient but tactful as well. The Thai colonel who had given him the flower arrangement began to nod as the dinner progressed. Each waiter, in passing, happened to brush gently past him, stirring him into temporary wakefulness until the next course.

During the conversation, Cooper noticed one of the guests near the foot of the table whose plate had remained empty except for a bunch of grapes and a mango. Then he realised that it was Mr. Blair, whom he hadn't recognised without the omnipresent Chinese pipe in his mouth. Blair was engaged in what appeared to be a double conversation involving the people on each side of him. Simultaneously.

When the baked Alaska was being served, Mme. Gauthier turned to him. "You must eat quickly, before the speeches begin," she said and Cooper was amused to see that his neighbours, evidently accustomed to the foot of the table at state banquets, had perceptibly speeded up their consumption of the dessert. He had just finished his own when he heard the clink of spoon against glass. Waiters suddenly materialised behind the guests and the colonel opposite him was again jostled into wakefulness as the champagne glasses were quickly filled.

The Prime Minister rose. "Your Royal Highnesses, Your Serene Highnesses, Your Highnesses, Your Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen," he began. "I would like to propose a toast. To the King of Thailand."

Waiters drew back chairs and the guests rose and stood at attention. The Thai band began to play. "The King's Anthem," whispered Mme. Gauthier. At its completion, the Prime Minister continued, "And now, a toast to the President of the United States." They raised their glasses while the band undertook "The Star-Spangled Banner."

The familiar strain resounding through the dining room took on added meaning for Cooper, as he surveyed the little group of MAAG people scattered among the guests in this spectacu-

lar palace. He could see the blunt, honest face of "Mad Mike" with its halo of white hair, as he stood under a large painting of fighting elephants—the "Mad Mike" who, one June morning at Château-Thierry over four decades before, had led his men over the top in an operation that earned him a place in history along with Sergeant York and Wild Bill Donovan. Cooper knew that "Mad Mike" had also served in World War II at the request of the President on missions that called for brains, cunning and his special kind of cold courage.

Now, standing at attention, he symbolised for Cooper another, older America . . . one that was tough and sinewy yet warm and expansive . . . a simpler America where gallantry and generosity were taken for granted. Cooper saw in the old, smiling figure one of the few men he had known who were big enough to be truly modest, and it occurred to him that of all the Americans who might have been picked to represent America in this quixotic country, he was the best.

When they sat down, after the anthem, the Prime Minister welcomed the General to Thailand and praised the work of the Advisory Group. Finishing, he turned a questioning glance towards Ambassador Murphy, who shook his head. Then he nodded to General Mason, who rose and stood for a moment. Cooper wondered if he were going to try the complicated salutation used by the Prime Minister. "Ladies and Gentlemen," he began, "Mrs. Mason and I appreciate the hospitality which we have enjoyed since our arrival here in Thailand . . ." He went on to mention the benefits which both countries hoped to obtain from the assistance programme. It was a short speech and, when he finished, Cooper, listening to the polite splatter of applause, studied the faces of the Thais around him for some inkling into their feelings. But each of them remained politely inscrutable, smiling at him and nodding genially.

At the conclusion of the dinner, the guests moved into another room where chairs had been set up around a platform draped in garnet velvet. General Kawee acted as host.

"Now," he said, "we will have some Thai dances. Perhaps some of you feel that you have already seen them all. However, after checking with the National Archives, I find they have about two thousand, so you may relax. You have at least a thousand more to go!"

To the sound of polite laughter he consulted a slip of paper in his hand. "The dance which begins the performance is the traditional one of greeting. You can tell this by the fact that the dancers throw flowers at the guests. By so doing they wish the guests happiness as beautiful as the flowers. Incidentally, they are all supposed to be fairies. So, to eliminate conjecture, all the dancers are young girls."

The curtains drew back to reveal an orchestra seated on the floor at one side of the stage. Xylophones, drums and reed instruments began a haunting melody in a minor key and six Thai dancers moved on to the stage clad in costumes encrusted with brilliants, each dancer wearing a tall, pointed headdress inlaid with bits of glass that sparkled as she turned and twisted in the stylised routine of the dance. Cooper recognised the dance as one of those pictured in Elsie Webster's article on Thailand.

When the dance ended General Kawee again stepped forward. "Now that you have been greeted," he said, "we will have the next number, which portrays the epic battle between the monkey god Hanuman and the hero Virunchambang."

He withdrew and, to the sudden clashing of cymbals, the male warrior dancers stepped out on the stage, some of them wearing green monkey masks over their faces and all of them carrying long staves which they brandished as they circled each other, balancing on one foot.

Halloran, seated near Cooper, leaned over towards him. "My God," he muttered, "and we're trying to modernise these people . . ."

At the finish, General Kawee stepped forward and raised his hand to interrupt the applause. "Ladies and Gentlemen,"

he said, "I want to remind you that this, of course, is a non-MDAP unit!" and the laughter and applause lasted into the next number.

When the entertainment programme was concluded, the Prime Minister and his wife rose and retired to the reception hall to bid goodnight to their guests.

Cooper was shaking hands with the Prime Minister when he saw the latter glance downward. Cooper's face flushed at the sight of the artificial flower he had tucked in his cummerbund earlier in the evening. It had fallen to the floor. The Prime Minister smiled. "You have dropped something, Captain."

Cooper picked it up. "Excuse me, Excellency," he said, "I was admiring the flower arrangements and one of your officers gave this to me as a souvenir. I assure you I have no silver tucked away."

The Prime Minister and the Lady Titana laughed and he moved on to find General Mason.

It took some time before all the guests could depart amid the flurry of goodnights on the front step. Cooper was standing beside the General and Mrs. Mason when Colonel and Mrs. White passed them by with a smile and a goodnight handshake. It was several minutes before Cooper realised that the Whites' chauffeur had brought their car up to the porte-cochere before the General's. He covertly glanced around to see how many people had noticed this breach of etiquette but the faces of the diplomatic corps were impassive. Finally the General's car arrived and as it rolled away from the entrance Cooper, in the front seat, turned around, "Sir, I'll have that straightened out tomorrow morning!"

"What?" asked the General, blandly.

"The business about White's car coming up before yours!"

"Did it? I hadn't noticed," he said with maddening unconcern.

Cooper turned to the General's driver. "Why you let Colonel White's car go before the General's?"

"Now wait a minute, Jim," said the General, smoothly. "Don't take it out on him. We'll handle the thing tomorrow morning at the office."

Cooper subsided, whereupon the driver handed him a small parcel, addressed to "Aide-de-Camp Cooper." General and Mrs. Mason leaned forward to watch him open it. Wrapped in tissue paper was an arrangement of fresh flowers which Mrs. Mason identified as frangipani, mali and ginger. A gold-embossed card tucked in the package read: "Thank you for the nicest compliment of the evening." It was signed by Lady Titana.

Back at the Chakri, Cooper made his nightly visit to the cocktail lounge. Tongchai was not there but Miss Patterson waved to him from one of the tables. In the darkness he could not tell who she was with but it looked like one of the Marine guards from the Embassy. Cooper was about to order a drink when he saw Mr. Blair hurrying through the door and, on impulse, he cancelled his order and slipped away. Up in his room, he was mixing himself a nightcap when there was a knock at the door. Annoyed at the thought that Blair might have followed him upstairs, he was pleasantly surprised to find Prasert standing in the hallway. "Hello, Jim," said the Thai, with a smile. "It is late and if you are ready to go to the bed . . . I can come back another time . . ."

"No, no. Come in," said Cooper. "I'm glad you came by. You haven't seen my quarters. How about a drink?"

Seating themselves at the coffee table Prasert said, "I knew tonight was the Government House reception and you told me you lived here, so I have come to see you. There is something I want to ask . . ."

"Shoot!"

"It can wait," said Prasert, watching Cooper mix the drinks. In a few moments Cooper was telling him about the reception.

"I told you that you would like it," said Prasert. "And now it begins."

"What begins?"

"The . . . what do you call it . . . indoctrination. To show you how nice we are."

"But you are!"

"Of course we are," laughed Prasert. "But we are not as nice as all that!"

"What do you mean?"

Prasert sat back with his drink in his hand, suddenly serious.

"Was Air Marshal Wicharn at Government House to-night?"

"He was in the receiving line," said Cooper. "I said 'Good evening' to him . . ."

"Did you also say 'Goodnight'?"

"I don't remember. Come to think of it, no. He wasn't there . . ."

Prasert nodded. "You know he is also the Minister of Commerce and therefore my boss. Tonight I drove past my office. All the lights in the Ministry were burning. In front of the gate my car was almost hit by a big green Mercedes. Wicharn was in it."

"So?"

"So I don't know what was up. Once when something like this happened, there was a coup."

"A coup? But everybody at Government House tonight seemed friendly. They were laughing and talking with each other . . ."

"Of course. That means nothing."

Cooper leaned forward. "You don't really think . . ."

"I do not know. I am only the small fish in the big lake. But it would be a good time right now. The new Chief of MAAG has arrived."

"The Chief of MAAG doesn't have anything to do with it . . ."

Prasert smiled and finished his drink. "Jimmy, I hope the General is not so naïve as you!"

"Believe me, Prasert, MAAG is non-political. It works with the Armed Services as a whole."

"Of course. But that does not mean anything. Every time the ship comes to Bangkok with more tanks or planes the balance changes a little. In the last coup, it was the Army versus the Navy, and the Air Force—how do you say it—pushed the scales. Now it is the Army and the Air Force, with the Navy on the sideline."

Cooper smiled patronisingly. "This may be true, Prasert. But it doesn't involve MAAG. I know that."

Prasert sighed. "MAAG doesn't have to be involved. All they have to do is to be as naïve as you! Jim, you should keep the eyes open. The world is not so simple a place as you seem to think."

After Prasert had gone, Cooper sat back, smoking a cigarette. He knew that MAAG was not involved. A coup was something you read about in *Time* magazine or saw in the newsreels. It didn't happen to people you met and talked to. And with the Communists at the border, surely there was no time for this kind of nonsense.

As he sipped his drink, fragments of conversations crossed his mind. The Navy briefing with that talk of the hidden Marines . . . the elaborate evasion of Air Force capabilities . . . and that furtive conference between Colonel White and Wicharn under the tamarind tree. Surely they were coincidences . . . and yet . . .

6

On their way to the office the next morning, Cooper mentioned Marshal Wicharn's absence from Government House during the latter part of the previous evening and the comments of Prasert on the activity at the Ministry of Commerce. When he had finished, General Mason stared at him for a moment. "Irresponsible gossip, I'd call it," was his only comment. Chagrined, Cooper vowed to himself that he would

never again mention politics, even if the whole goddamned country was about to blow up.

As the car negotiated Bangkok traffic, they fell to discussing the subject of interpreters. Cooper pointed out that it might be helpful if, instead of depending upon various interpreters picked up at random, the General had one person whom he could depend upon to give him a straightforward, literal translation of all matters he discussed with the Thais. He added that when the interpreter's prejudices and biases were known, he would be more reliable than a succession of unknown sycophants.

"Come to think of it, Jim," said the General, after a few moments of reflection, "a second aide might be the answer. Some Thai to work under you and act chiefly as interpreter and general liaison officer. How about keeping your eyes open and see if you can find me a good one?"

At the birdcage, the Assistant G-1, Lieutenant Colonel Childs, was waiting with a sheaf of papers in his hand. Cooper remembered having met him briefly during the tour of headquarters. He was Captain Mannon's boss, and Cooper remembered hearing Mannon refer to him as "old lady Childs"; a tall, overweight man in his middle thirties with a chubby, smiling face, the effect of which was somewhat cancelled by a shrewish look about the eyes.

The Colonel had a pile of applications for the General's signature. One was for membership in the Royal Bangkok Sports Club. Another was for membership in the Rotary Club. "It's *de rigueur*, sir," he said, "for the Chief of MAAG to dine with the Babbitts once a week." An obdurate look from the General put an end to Childs' flippancy and the rest of his business was conducted in iron prose. Gathering up the signed applications, he left as Colonel White appeared in the doorway.

"Ambassador Murphy called. He'd like to see you at ten this morning, General," he announced. "He didn't say why, but it

sounded important." As Mason nodded, White continued, "You have three more official calls to make, one of them on the Chief of Police . . ."

"All right," said the General. "Go ahead and set them up. What about Mrs. Mason's calls?"

"Those will be handled by my wife, sir. She's familiar with the procedures."

Cooper interrupted. "Yesterday, Colonel, Miss Patterson reminded me that she made up a list of calls for Mrs. Mason. In fact, I've got them right here . . ."

". . . This is something beyond Miss Patterson's capabilities," interjected the Colonel, giving him a hard, unwinking stare. Cooper returned the look, remembering Mannon's explanation of the situation and wondering just how long even a bureaucracy could justify such incompetence.

"Incidentally," said the General, "I'd like to have my own interpreter, some Thai officer who can also act as aide."

White's face brightened. "Another aide?" he glanced at Cooper. "Of course. How about an aide from each of the three Thai Services?"

"For Christ's sake, White! I don't want a squad. One man!"

"Yes, sir," said White and then he added, "No problem at all. In fact, I think I know just the man."

The General caught an expression on the Colonel's face which caused him to add, "Send your candidates to Cooper and let him look them over."

White's face fell.

"Now, how about my house?" asked the General. Colonel White explained that his wife had obtained a list of available houses and suggested that she would go with Mrs. Mason to look them over. "Some of them are quite large," he added, "and a few have detached suites. It might be more economical if Cooper stayed with you."

Cooper took a deep breath. Some day I'll kill that son of a bitch, he thought. He glanced up and saw the General smiling,

as though he had read his thoughts. "What about that, Jim?"

"Well, sir, I hadn't thought much about it... I..."

The General took pity on him. "On second thought, I don't think the idea would work out anyway, White. Let's just forget that one."

Back at his desk, Cooper located the list of calls for Mrs. Mason which Miss Patterson had made up for him originally. He checked them over and then called her to the desk. "I've been looking at this list, Miss Patterson, and it seems to me there's at least one omission. What about the wife of the Chief of Police?"

"Not necessary, Captain."

"Why not? Have you checked this with the Embassy protocol people?"

"Captain, we never deal with those people. They're just not up on these things." She leaned over the desk and said confidentially, "Actually, they're jealous of MAAG. So we ignore them."

Cooper sat looking at her until she straightened up again.

"The *Diplomatic Procedure Guide* says that the Embassy Protocol Officer makes all decisions on official calls for MAAG."

"The Protocol Officer at the Embassy is Miss Lindsey," she replied, as though stating a momentous fact.

There was a pause. "So what?"

Miss Patterson was nettled. "Miss Lindsey is new. She's not up on Thai protocol. Besides, she has no background for this kind of thing."

He had to control himself to keep from shouting, "And what the hell background do you have, you peasant?" But he swallowed and folded up the list again.

Still smarting from the argument, Cooper consulted his pad and found the notation, "White's driver—Government House." He got up and went downstairs and out into the motor pool, where he found Colonel White's driver lounging with the others under an orchid tree.

He brought the driver, a sullen-looking Thai, into the interpreter's office where he proceeded to question him on his actions at Government House the night before.

"He say Colonel White want his car to be first in line," said the interpreter, finally.

"Explain to him that Colonel White is no longer the Chief of MAAG. General Mason is now the Number One man."

After an exchange of Thai, the interpreter turned to Cooper. "He say he is Number One driver in MAAG and he should drive for General Mason."

"Goddamn it," said Cooper, "remind this wise son of a bitch that he's not the General's driver. So he is not the Number One man in the motor pool!"

Another rapid-fire Thai conversation ensued and the interpreter nodded his head. "He understand."

"Ask him if Colonel White explained that from now on his car will always *follow* the General's car when they leave in any kind of formation."

The interpreter turned to the driver and after a few moments of discussion told Cooper that the Colonel had not told the driver about any change in procedures.

"Inform him," said Cooper, "that from now on, the General's car is the first MAAG car to leave any ceremony. And if I find him cutting ahead again I will personally yank him out of the car and kick his ass from here to Bang San!"

Another exchange followed and the interpreter said, "He say he must talk with Colonel White."

"Okay," said Cooper to the interpreter. "Tell him he can talk to any-goddamned-body he pleases but he'd better not pull ahead of the General's driver again."

Cooper walked out of the office and back to his desk. He felt a little better.

At quarter to ten, Cooper accompanied the General to the Embassy for the call on Ambassador Murphy. They were met on the front steps by Lieutenant Halloran who conducted

them upstairs to "Mad Mike's" office. On the way the Lieutenant proudly pointed out the architectural advantages of the new building . . . air conditioning, indirect fluorescent lighting, terazzo flooring . . . all of it so stark and modern that Cooper felt the building could have served equally well as a grade school, army barracks or tobacco warehouse.

One wall of the Ambassador's office was solidly lined with heavy red-and-black volumes of jurisprudence and State *Department procedures*. *Carpeted in blue, it contained a* walnut desk, a modern Danish settee flanked by several functional chairs and a potted fern. Even the water carafe, Cooper noted, was streamlined. In the bright daylight, "Mad Mike" looked considerably older than he had at Government House.

"How have you been, Ed?" he asked as they sat down. "And you too, Cooper?" he added, blowing his nose. "God-damned air conditioning always gives me a cold."

Looking at the man in the chair as he stuffed a handkerchief in his pocket with a wide, mottled hand, Cooper wondered how it must feel to be a genuine history-book celebrity. To know that whatever happened to you, from a broken leg to a bad cold, was news and might be flashed halfway around the world to appear in the next day's newspapers.

"I'm glad you came by, Ed," said the Ambassador. "I want to explain our set-up here. Also," and he looked at him significantly, "a certain matter which came up last night during the Government House dinner . . ." He glanced at Cooper, who recognised his cue. "Sir," he said, "I wonder if I might be excused. I'd like to talk with the Protocol Chief."

"By all means," said Murphy. "Halloran will show you where her office is."

Miss Lindsey, the Chief of Protocol, was a black-haired girl whose long, narrow face was covered by vivid suntan powder and whose lips were touched with brilliant red. "I'm glad you came over," she said, after Cooper had explained the purpose

of his visit. "I hope this means the start of a new régime at MAAG."

"Why is a new régime necessary?"

"Captain Cooper, may I speak frankly?"

"Of course."

"You're the first person from MAAG who has ever walked into this office with a sensible question. They act like lunatic children over there and the Ambassador is getting concerned about it. I wish there was some way to let Colonel White and his gang know that the Embassy is neither jealous nor ignorant of MAAG."

"The officers over there should understand that MAAG's place in the diplomatic structure is unusual. I don't make these decisions, they're decreed by Washington. And other than General Mason, the rest of the personnel are, diplomatically speaking, nowhere. In Thailand the top man is the Ambassador. After him comes the head of FOA. The third man is General Mason as head of a Special Mission. That's it. After General Mason comes the Chargé. Below him are the military attachés, one for the Army, Navy and Air Force."

"In other words," said Cooper, "the only man actually on the diplomatic list is the Chief of MAAG?"

"That's right. So at any official function, Colonel White, and Hawley, and Commander Enright and all the rest rank below the diplomatic list. If one of the attachés is only a major, he nevertheless ranks above Colonel White as far as protocol goes."

"I'm glad I came by," said Cooper. "I'm beginning to get the picture. Look, here's a list of calls for Mrs. Mason made up by our Miss Patterson. Can you tell me whether it's right or not?"

Miss Lindsey took the list and looked it over. "No, Captain. It simply isn't right." She reached in her desk drawer. "Here is the list of calls for Mrs. Mason. I made it up some time ago, waiting for someone to ask for it."

He folded up the paper and put it in his pocket.

"Thanks for coming in, Captain," she said. "I had a kind of feeling that when General Mason arrived, things would straighten out."

Back at MAAG, Cooper had just seated himself at his desk when Miss Patterson walked over. "Colonel White would like to see you," she said. "Something about his driver, I think."

Cooper had been expecting the summons but he felt this was one matter important enough to be handled to a conclusion once and for all, enlisting the General's help if necessary. He noticed the General was not in the birdcage and asked Miss Patterson where he had gone.

"He's in the latrine."

The latrine was located beyond the Colonel's desk at the end of the porch. Cooper suddenly had an idea. He got up and presented himself to Colonel White, who glared up at him. "Captain," he began, "I understand that you saw fit to give instructions to my driver this morning."

"Yes, sir."

"May I ask why?"

"It concerned Government House last night. Your driver pulled in ahead of the General's car at the end of the reception." As he spoke, Cooper heard the door of the latrine slam shut and the General's heavy tread on the porch.

"I'm quite capable of handling my own driver, Captain, and I'd appreciate it if you would leave him the hell alone."

"Yes, sir." Cooper heard the steps behind him and he raised his voice. "I'm sorry about it, sir. I'll apologise to your driver, if you think it's necessary." Colonel White looked up and from the look on his face Cooper knew the General was standing behind them.

"That's not necessary, Captain," he said crisply. "And let's just drop the subject." He looked down at his papers with a dismissive nod.

Suddenly the General was standing at the desk. "What the hell goes on here, White?"

"Nothing important, sir," said White, rising. "Just a minor flap about the motor pool."

"What's this about apologising to a driver, Cooper?"

"Sir," said Cooper, "I guess it was my fault. I talked to Colonel White's driver about pulling ahead of your car at Government House last night. I knew the Colonel would chew him out about it and I was trying to explain . . . I shouldn't have butted in."

The General gave him a long look. "You're right. It's not your job to instruct Colonel White's driver on basic military etiquette." He turned to White. "I'm sure Colonel White is capable of correcting the stupid mistake made by his driver last night and I'll be willing to bet that it will never happen again."

The next morning Mrs. Mason joined the General and Cooper for breakfast in the dining room. Outside, the morning sun daubed gold on the spires of the Royal Palace, and the wide boulevard was filled with movement and colour. Finishing his papaya, Cooper handed Mrs. Mason the list of calls Miss Lindsey had made up.

"Thanks, Jim. Mrs. White talked to me yesterday. She also gave me a list. Something like this. She's setting up the calls for me."

"That's nice of her," said Cooper, "but it's supposed to be done by the Protocol Officer at the Embassy."

Mrs. Mason looked at him over the rim of her coffee cup. "Emily White evidently doesn't have too much faith in that woman at the Embassy." Cooper was silent. He was on Miss Lindsey's side but had no desire to get mixed up in a female brawl over calls.

Mrs. Mason set down her cup and glanced over Miss Lindsey's paper. "You know, Jim," she said, "this doesn't seem to be the same as Emily's."

"It probably isn't," said Cooper. "As a matter of fact, I've

got still another offering here," and he pulled out Miss Patterson's list. "Here's the one from MAAG."

Mrs. Mason looked it over. "Oh, dear," she said, "this is different from the other two. What do you think I should do, Edwin?"

The General put down his toast. "I wasn't listening, Eleanor. What's the problem?"

"Sir," interrupted Cooper. "Miss Patterson gave me a list of calls for Mrs. Mason. It's got six names. Miss Lindsey at the Embassy added three more. Now Mrs. White's list has even more names on it."

"Eleanor," said the General, "surely you can handle this?"

Mrs. Mason smiled. "Why don't I just go over all of these and make up my own list? Both of you know I'm going to do that anyway."

"Very reasonable," said the General.

"And thank you anyway, Jim," she said, patting his arm.

Cooper thought it would be a good time to get in his plug. "I talked with Miss Lindsey yesterday," he said, "and she struck me as pretty capable. She said there's always been trouble with MAAG over protocol." He mentioned the points they had discussed. When he finished, Mrs. Mason smiled sweetly. "I'm sure your Miss Lindsey is a capable girl," she said. "But I think that Emily and I can handle the problem without too much trouble."

In the car on their way to headquarters, the General reached over and slapped Cooper on the knee. "Snap out of it, Jim. Stop worrying about the women and their calls. They'll make out."

Cooper realised he hadn't spoken a complete sentence since he had left the breakfast table. "I don't know why none of them will follow Miss Lindsey's advice . . ."

The General chuckled. "That's simple, Jim. They've heard that Miss Lindsey is a real dish!"

Ever since his arrival in Thailand, Cooper had been promised his own vehicle and, after waiting over a month, he was finally assigned, with Mannon's help, a new green Vauxhall sedan. As soon as he had obtained a licence to drive in Thailand, he reminded Prasert of the latter's invitation to take him to the beach at Bang San. Accordingly, Prasert was waiting at the Chakri one Saturday noon when Cooper arrived home from the headquarters.

Together they loaded their bathing suits, the bourbon, and a portable radio in the car. Cooper wanted to buy a small ice chest for use on the beach. "You should save your money," Prasert said. "We can get a second-hand ice-cooler in the Nakorn Kasem."

"Isn't that the 'Thieves' Market'?"

"Please!" said Prasert. "The government has announced that there are no more thieves in Bangkok. So how can there be a Thieves' Market?"

"You win. Where can we get the ice chest then?"

"At the place which would be the Thieves' Market, if there were any thieves in the city, of course! Let's go!"

In the Chinese sector of the city they parked near the entrance to a series of narrow alleys that comprised the Thieves' Market. The market was a maze of cobbled burrows crowded with small shops and stalls which, in the old days, served as outlets for Chinese burglars—a celebrated group of footpads who could secure anything, even, as legend had it, on order.

Cooper realised, walking through the market, that many of the items on display were merely second-hand, and the area appeared to be a combination of rummage sale, thrift shop, five-and-ten and curio store. They passed a button stall that displayed, in cardboard boxes, every conceivable kind of but-

ton; modern plastic ones, cloisonné buttons with pictures of Thai kings, huge buttons inset with miniature portraits. There were buttons of pearl, jade, bone, porcelain, wood and metal. Prasert managed to pull Cooper away from the button stand, only to lose him in a crammed bookshop that carried everything from the newest American paperbacks to books in Japanese, Chinese and even Thai. In the back of the shop Prasert stood by impatiently as Cooper rummaged through rows of musty books written by the old missionaries. With a whoop of delight he discovered several of Elsie Webster's books on the Korean War, which he pulled down from the shelf and insisted on showing to Prasert, who nodded and quietly replaced each volume, remarking, "Only Americans read books about war written by a woman!"

Finally he took Cooper's arm in desperation. "Come on now, or we will never get to Bang San." Still holding his arm, he got Cooper past a metal stall offering gongs, screens and boxes of old dental inlays. They reached a hardware store where Cooper bought a small cooler for ninety ticals.

Prasert steered him towards the exit of the Thieves' Market, but Cooper caught a glimpse of a shop selling statuary and he insisted on stopping to look in the show window. Prasert was patiently explaining the meaning of the Buddha heads, when, unexpectedly, they heard voices from inside the shop. One of them was a man. An American. He was shouting, "Three hundred ticals! He must be nuts! Tell him I'll give him seventy-five and not a setang more!"

They could hear an exchange of muttered Thai and then another voice was heard. "Sah, he say he very sorry, but cannot sell the Buddha head for seventy-five tics."

"He knows what he can do with all his heads. He can cram them up his ass! Three hundred ticals for that!"

Prasert plucked Cooper's sleeve but Cooper caught his hand and both of them continued to listen.

"He say, sah, that maybe he can sell for two hundred and seventy-five . . ." The American voice could be heard again. "I

said seventy-five ticals. Goddamn it, does he know who he's talking to? Tell him I'm from MAAG! We're over here to help you people out. Is this the kind of treatment we get?"

There was another exchange of Thai and the soft voice said, "He know about MAAG but he is sorry that he no can . . ."

"Remind him that I'm not some screwball tourist! I live here!" Then the voice dropped. "Ask him how he'd like an 'Off Limits' sign on this dump. Off limits! I'll make sure that nobody from MAAG or anybody else ever comes in this place again . . ."

Again Prasert motioned to Cooper that they should go but the Captain shook his head. "Just a minute, Prasert. Sounds like some MAAG soldier trying to pull a fast one. Come on. I'll fix his little red wagon!"

Together they stepped into the store. Cooper stopped in amazement. Lieutenant Colonel Childs, the Assistant G-1, was standing at the counter with his Thai driver.

"Good afternoon, Colonel," said Cooper, when he recovered from his surprise.

"Oh, hello, Cooper," said the Colonel, obviously embarrassed. Cooper introduced Prasert, and Childs recovered some of his aplomb during the exchange of greetings. "I . . . I was looking over the Buddha heads they have here," he said. "Quite a collection."

"Yes. We heard," said Cooper.

"You've been outside?" The Colonel's plump face managed a wan smile. "You know how it is with these people. You've got to bargain with them or they'll do you in. Orientals, you know." Then, realising that Prasert was standing there, he turned to him. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean . . ."

"I understand," said Prasert with a tight smile.

"You're lucky today, Colonel," said Cooper, suddenly. "Prasert is quite an expert on these items. If you are having any trouble with the proprietor . . ."

The owner of the store was a short, grey-haired Thai with

betel-stained lips. At the reference he bowed slightly, with dignity.

"Oh, not exactly," interjected the Colonel. "We were just . . . discussing the price."

"I heard something about putting this place Off Limits . . ."

The Colonel paled. "Off limits? I'm . . . afraid you misunderstood. I couldn't do that . . . even if I wanted to . . ."

"I didn't think so," said Cooper. "But Prasert, here, will be glad to help you . . ." He had no qualms about enjoying the Colonel's discomfiture.

"I don't really think the whole thing is worth bothering about . . ."

"Which head were you looking at, sir?" interrupted Cooper.

"That one on the counter. But it doesn't matter that much . . ."

"No trouble at all," said Cooper. "Prasert, take a look at it. How much would you say it was worth?"

Prasert picked up the head and studied it. "It's a Sukotai reproduction," he said, finally. "About fifty or sixty years old. I'd say that about three hundred ticals is a fair price. Maybe the man might come down to two hundred and seventy-five."

Cooper picked up the head. "Did you try offering him two seventy-five?"

The Colonel was at a loss for words.

"How much did you offer him?" continued Cooper, helpfully.

The Colonel shrugged. "I'm a bit mixed up," he replied. "I've been bargaining for several things . . ."

"But this is the one you want, isn't it?" asked Cooper, relentlessly. The Colonel nodded.

"Let me handle it, then," said Prasert and he turned to the owner. After some rapid-fire Thai, Prasert turned back. "He says he will sell it for two hundred and seventy-five ticals."

"There you are, Colonel," said Cooper, smiling. The Colonel looked at both of them for a moment. Then he

reached in his pocket for his wallet and counted out two hundred and seventy-five ticals, spreading them on the counter. The proprietor, not quite understanding the whole transaction but nodding politely, wrapped up the Buddha head.

"I appreciate your help," said the Colonel. "Language difficulties . . . you know . . ."

Cooper smiled. "Glad we could be of help. This Off Limits business . . .," and he saw the Colonel wince at the words, "can be a rough proposition."

"You understand, of course, that any talk of Off Limits wasn't . . . serious . . .," said the Colonel. "I wouldn't want anything like that to . . . well, to get back . . ."

Cooper decided that one more turn of the screw was in order. "The General is always interested in cases where MAAG people get taken. I thought for a moment that that is what was happening . . ."

By this time the package was wrapped and the Colonel, after motioning to his driver to come along, seized it and after a hasty goodbye, disappeared. Cooper and Prasert looked at each other and smiled.

"The Marquis de Sade would be proud of you," said Prasert. "And now, please . . . Bang San!"

Back in the Vauxhall again, they stopped to fill the chest with crushed ice. Then, crossing a big iron bridge, they finally reached open country. The Chao Phya river was visible far across the rice paddies.

Along some of the klongs they saw floating houseboats—wooden craft not much larger than good-sized rowboats with bamboo mats arched over the centre. Prasert explained that entire Thai families lived out their lives on these small craft . . . sleeping, eating, washing, breeding . . . all within the compass of a few feet.

They passed groves of betel-nut palms and flame trees. Far off, on the river, Prasert pointed out great rafts of chained

teakwood logs, each one supporting a little bamboo hut on top where the attendants lived. He explained that they had floated down the river from the jungles of northern Thailand, some of them having been on their way for three or even four years.

Cooper manoeuvred the Vauxhall past bullock carts, creaking slowly down the highway, and several busloads of laughing, shouting Thais, noting that no Thai seemed to be able to board a bus without assuming an air of carnival. Something about the rickety, careening boxes-on-wheels invariably touched off their sense of Mai Ben Rai.

Here and there, wallowing in the mud of a klong or grazing on rice-paddy dikes were the grey bulks of the water buffalo. They passed one little Thai boy, fast asleep, spread-eagled on the back of one of the huge, lumbering animals. "Can you think of a better way to watch the family buffalo?" asked Prasert in reply to Cooper's query.

"You have been in Thailand for more than a month," said Prasert, after a silence. "Long enough for a 'ferung' to write a critical book about us."

"I'm not that kind of a ferung," said Cooper. "Besides, I like Thailand." He began humming, out of sheer exuberance.

"What is that song you are singing?"

"'Shall We Dance?' from *The King and I*," he replied. "By the way, I read a book the other night called *An English Woman in the Court of the King of Siam*. I hadn't realised that *The King and I* was based on Mrs. Leonowens' own book."

"What did you think of it?"

"It surprised me because it's a lot different in feeling from *The King and I*. The original Anna was a bigoted, petty, narrow-minded English missionary. King Mongkut was pretty patient with her. I'd have chopped her damned head off—a couple of times! Or else thrown her the hell out of Siam."

"I am surprised to hear you say that, Jimmy. Because that is the way the Thais feel. That's why they do not like the book."

"I don't blame them, Prasert-san. I got the impression that Mongkut was trying to modernise his country. He was a fascinating character. A Buddhist monk forty years old suddenly inheriting a kingdom and a harem of wives—studying English, corresponding with Queen Victoria, trying to combine Victorian England and barbaric Siam. The original Anna makes him out to be a clown."

"I am glad you understand. We are annoyed when ferungs talk about that book, as Americans are when we talk about *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *The Grapes of Wrath*."

Cooper nodded. "It's as though Abraham Lincoln invited a Thai woman to the White House to teach Tad the Siamese language and customs and then she wrote a book telling how goddamned funny he sounded trying to talk Thai—although she herself didn't know a word of English . . ."

Prasert interrupted delightedly . . . , "And he would ask her not to teach his son about Buddhism because he was already a Christian and this would make her angry. Then she would try to get Lincoln interested in other women because he had only one wife and everybody knows that a ruler should have at least seventy-five . . ."

"Wait a minute," said Cooper, getting into the swing of it . . . "The climax would come when she taught him how to do the Ramwong and they danced it together in the East Room—he, of course, wearing a stovepipe hat, shawl and a long black coat . . ."

They both laughed and Cooper started singing "Pretend You're Happy When You're Blue," and Prasert countered with "I Don't Care If the Sun Doesn't Shine . . ."

"Wrong, Prasert! It's 'The Sun *Don't* Shine . . .'"

"That is incorrect," reproved Prasert. "Even I know that is wrong grammar. Don't be so pudee!"

"Pudee?"

"Low class! Not 'heng sui,' which is upper class."

"Okay." Cooper picked up the song . . . "I Don't Care If I am Pudee" and turned to Prasert. "I'm happy, Prasert-san."

I can't help it. I don't give a damn whether I'm pudee or heng sui. I'm from New England and until I was twenty years old I was cold every day of my life. You can't imagine what it is like to live under palm trees all the time."

They passed a Thai house built over a klong. There were several little children playing in front of it. "Now there is happiness," he continued. "No frustrations, no worries. Just plain happiness!"

"This is good?" asked Prasert.

"Why not?"

"Well, maybe you are mixing up happiness with Mai Ben Rai . . . They are not the same."

"You stayed in Germany too long!"

Prasert smiled. "Maybe. But you are talking now like a man who will some day 'go native,' as you Americans say, and you will be very unhappy."

"Why should I be unhappy?" countered Cooper.

"Because you are not the type. Some day you will meet a Thai girl. She will be beautiful and you will, how you say, 'flip the cover.'"

"The lid.' But I have already met a beautiful Thai girl. In the bar at the hotel. I look for her every day. Why should I be unhappy when I find her again?"

"She will be dangerous for you. You say she is beautiful. She will go to bed with you. And you will find she is passionate. But we are like sparrows. That is all there is. Ferungs always think that this is in addition to romance, and true love and all the other things, but in Thailand this is not true. So if you are hopeless in love then you are lost. You will become the . . . beachwalker."

"You mean that East is still East and West is still West?"

Prasert nodded.

"We have a saying, Prasert-san, that 'love makes the world go 'round.'"

"It makes half the world go 'round, maybe. The Western half!" They laughed and Prasert defiantly changed the subject

by singing "I Don't Care If the Sun *Doesn't* Shine." In a few moments he stopped. "You know that Thai men can have more than one wife?"

"I've read about it. Do they?"

"If they have enough money."

"But your government officials don't. I've met their wives . . ."

"You met one of them!"

"You're kidding!"

"No, I am not. You have met, in most cases, wife number two. These men you know are about fifty years old. So wife number one is the wife they married when they were young. She speaks only Thai and maybe chews betel nut and cooks the rice. Wife number two speaks the English and wears American clothes. She goes to Government House and to cocktail parties. Wife number three, whom you will never meet, is about eighteen years old and very beautiful."

"But that changes the whole picture . . ."

"That is what I mean. What happens to romance now? Where is your 'Silver Threads in the Gold'?"

"Christ! How do the wives get along?"

"We are not so stupid as to have them in the same house! Each wife has her own. But why are you so surprised? You Americans do the same thing."

"The hell we do!"

"I have seen your films . . ."

"That isn't the same at all. That's just playing around . . ."

Prasert shrugged. "So in Thailand we don't play around. It is legal."

Cooper was silent for a moment. "Tell me something," he said. "Does the Prime Minister . . . have more than one wife?"

Prasert smiled. "Titana does not believe in plural wives. She is what you call . . . the 'war hatchet'!"

Cooper laughed. "I know. We have the same type back home!"

They passed a small sign that said "Bang San." "There it

is," said Prasert. "Thousand Pleasures." Cooper turned off the highway into a narrow road leading towards the sea. At the end of the road he turned again, this time on to a wide esplanade which stretched for half a mile along the beach. A long, low hotel with a curved Siamese roof sat in lonely splendour about halfway down the parkway. Across from the hotel, on the beach, was a row of about a dozen small cabanas.

"Can we stay in one of the cabanas and eat and drink in the hotel?" asked Cooper.

"I hoped you would suggest that. I am beginning to think that you are not a ferung at all," said Prasert.

"Why not?"

"Because a real ferung would want the biggest front room in the hotel with a balcony and room service."

"Would you rather we went to the hotel?"

"No! Let's be pudec and stay with the Thais."

They were assigned to cottage number seven and were given bedding to take along. The cottage proved to be a one-room affair and a porch facing the sea. It contained two single beds, each beneath a mosquito net, plus a table and several beach chairs. Adjoining the room was a booth with painted wooden walls and a single rusty shower pipe. The unscreened windows had wooden shutters.

As soon as they had unloaded their belongings and changed into bathing suits, they raced towards the surf. They returned to the cabin when the sun was beginning to set and a great swirl of primrose clouds hung in the western sky. After showering and dressing, they walked over to the long white hotel, where they found the cocktail lounge, a wide pavilion overlooking the sea. Music, soft and caressing, came from somewhere behind the potted banyan trees. They lolled back in comfortable wicker chairs, ordered bourbon and water, and watched the sun begin to sink towards the sapphire sea. Cooper proceeded to forget about the General, Colonel White, Patterson and the rest of them.

Suddenly a chilling shriek cut through the soft music. It

came from a clump of palms on the hotel lawn. Cooper sat upright. "What was that!"

Prasert casually continued to drink. "Nothing. Probably a rat or maybe a cat, caught by a snake."

Cooper relaxed again. The jungle. And just a few feet from a terrace with fluorescent lights.

While they idly conversed, a thin figure in white, with a shiny bald pate gleaming in the setting sun, strolled across the expanse of lawn. He carried a stick in his hand and now and then he used it to slash at the grass. Cooper recognised him. It was Mr. Blair. At that moment the economist glanced up, paused for a moment and then, waving the stick in recognition, advanced towards the terrace.

"Oh Christ!" moaned Cooper.

"It's your ferung friend, Mr. Blair," said Prasert.

"Hello there!" called out Blair as he came up the stairs. "How's my military adviser?"

Cooper greeted him and introduced Prasert. "I didn't expect to see you way down here."

Blair paused to insert a fresh cigarette into his Chinese pipe. After shaking hands he found a seat on the balustrade, his stick under his arm like a riding crop.

"Got a cottage down here. Keep it all year 'round. Come down quite often."

Cooper summoned the bartender. "Thank you," said Blair. "Don't drink myself. I'll take an orange juice, though."

"I take it this is your first trip down here, Cooper," he said.

"Yes. Prasert was telling me about the place and I've got a car now, so we came down for the weekend."

"Where are you staying? Here at the hotel?"

"Over there." Cooper pointed to the cabanas.

"Good idea! Cheaper than the hotel. I'd invite you to my cabin but I've got guests this weekend. The Dvoraks. Old Bangkok trader. Going home next week. Fine couple. Been here for years." He looked around. "Ah, there they are. Been walking on the beach." He waved his stick in the air and hallooed

until he got their attention. They turned towards the hotel, a heavy man with close-cropped hair and a plump blonde woman in a mass of floating chiffon who looked as though she should be on her way to a garden party.

On the terrace they were introduced. Mr. Dvorak was a middle-European, swarthy in complexion and smooth in manner. His wife's thick features were somewhat fuzzy. Cooper got the impression that they had been walking off a drinking spree.

"Yes," said Dvorak, answering a question of Prasert's. "My wife and I have spent many years in Asia. Almost forty. And thirty of them in Bangkok. We have worked here. Intended to spend the rest of our lives here. But now we are leaving." He sighed.

"Ya," said his wife, thoughtfully stirring the drink Cooper had ordered. "Ve thought Siam vas the place dat would nefer change for us . . . it vas the most delightful country in de East. But ve vere wrong."

"I don't understand," said Cooper. "From what I've seen I'd say it was the most . . ."

"... But my dear young man," interrupted Dvorak. "If you think it is nice now, you should have been here before the war. Then it was a paradise." He looked at his wife for confirmation but she was staring at her drink as though contemplating its contents. "Since the Japanese came," he continued, "it has begun to go down and down." He glanced at Prasert. "You must pardon me, Mr. Prasert," he said, putting his hand on the Thai's knee. "I do not wish to insult you or your country . . ."

"That's all right," said Prasert. "I think I know what you are going to say."

Mr. Dvorak sighed. "We feel it is going to continue to change, for the worst. Always the worst."

"All my life," he continued, glancing at Blair, "I have played the hunches. And I have a hunch about Siam right now. So, regretfully, we are leaving."

Mr. Blair put down his orange juice on the balustrade. "Tell them why."

"It began with the Japanese," said Dvorak. "Before then, the Thais were not so bad. But after the Japs came in and occupied the country, something happened. The Siamese learned from the Japs. They became more deceitful than I ever thought would be possible. For years they outwitted the stupid Japanese and it became a habit. Since that time they have continued, more and more.

"Now everything has a price. Everything. There is nothing you can name—loyalty, appreciation, friendship—that cannot now be bought and sold. But the bad part is that the price is so low! Ten ticals! That's all!

"Let me illustrate. In Europe, if an employee puts his hand in the till, takes out a thousand dollars and replaces it with an IOU, he knows he has done wrong. But here, when a Thai takes, for instance, a hundred dollars from the register and puts in its place an IOU, he thinks this is perfectly all right. He has promised to pay back. Even though it will take him one hundred years. And he resents that you should mention it to him."

Dvorak sat back and sipped his drink. Then Mrs. Dvorak looked up from her drink and lifted a warning finger to Cooper.

"You are American, ya?" she asked, in solemn tones. "And now you are vat you call . . . 'riding high' . . . because you bring some'ting for notting. Vait for de day ven you ask some'ting from dem! Anyting! No matter vat! You vill be surprised to find dat dey vill gif you notting vatefer."

Cooper was at a loss for words at the outburst. He glanced at Blair, who calmly continued to drink his juice. "Obviously you've had some discouraging experiences," he said, finally, to Mr. Dvorak.

The trader shrugged. "Too many!"

After they had finished their drinks, the Dvoraks shook hands and went off to continue their walk on the esplanade.

"He is right," said Prasert. "I have noticed the same thing since I have come back from Germany."

"Dvorak is one of the old-timers," said Blair. "Came here years ago when everybody figured Asia was a pushover. Everybody wanted to sell something to the four hundred million Chinese and the Southeast Asians. Forgot that they didn't want what the traders had to sell. Or couldn't afford it. Still can't! How many Chinese or Malaysians buy refrigerators? Or cars? Or TV sets? What they buy is Coca Cola. Fountain pens. Plastic belt buckles!" He shrugged. "Maybe it's best he does go back to Europe. We Thais can do better well by ourselves. All we have to do is watch out for the British!"

"Would you join us for dinner," asked Cooper, reluctantly.

"Thank you. You'd waste money. I never eat anything but fruit. I'll amble along. Got to keep track of my guests. They drink, you've noticed. Might fall into the ocean."

After Blair had left, Cooper and Prasert sat watching the eerie, wild desolation that sometimes accompanies the last stages of a sunset. For one poignant moment, the world seemed to quiver in lilac haze, then the night swiftly descended. As they rose to go into the dining room the street lights were already floating in the soft darkness like ice-blue bubbles.

Most of the tables were occupied by Thais and a sprinkling of ferungs, several of whom Cooper recognised from the various embassies.

They were about to sit down, when Cooper heard his name being called. He looked across the room to see Miss Patterson, her face pink with newly acquired sunburn. He walked over to her table.

"Fancy seeing you here," she said archly and waved a plump hand towards her table companion. "That's Mike. Mike Miller. He's with the Embassy."

A somewhat embarrassed young man rose and shook hands with Cooper, as the latter tried to place him. "I saw you at the Embassy the other day," he said, a little hesitantly. "You're General Mason's aide, aren't you?"

"That's right," said Cooper. "And you're . . .?"

"One of the Marine guards."

It was Cooper's turn to be embarrassed.

"Won't you join us?" asked Miss Patterson.

"Thanks. But my friend and I already have a table."

"Too bad," she said, glancing over at Prasert. "Wasn't the beach wonderful today?"

He nodded. "Do you come here often?"

"Occasionally," she said, conferring a wide, conspiratorial smile on the Marine.

He excused himself and went back to Prasert. "Jesus!" he muttered as he sat down. "What the hell is she doing down here with an enlisted man? And a kid at that. He's at least fifteen years younger than she is!"

"She is stealing from the cradle?" queried Prasert.

"She ought to have more sense," said Cooper, grimly.

"They are staying here together?"

"I don't know," said Cooper. "Surely she couldn't be *that* stupid. Some of these people must know who she is!"

"It is easy to find out," said Prasert, helpfully.

"Oh, it isn't any of my business how she spends her week-ends. There's no law that says she can't go swimming with Marine privates if she wants to."

"Swimming ended some time ago," said Prasert as he picked up the menu.

When they finished their meal, they walked through the lobby and Prasert disappeared for a few minutes. He rejoined Cooper on the front steps. "She's staying with him tonight," he said.

"How do you know?"

"I asked the clerk. They have a double room."

"Oh, no!"

"Oh, yes!" laughed Prasert. "Now what will you do? Inform the General?"

Cooper shook his head. "No. I'll talk to her myself when we get back."

"It is all your fault anyhow."

"What?"

"She really wants to spend the night with you, Jimmy."

"Me?"

"I was watching her when you were talking. I can tell." Slowly the two of them strolled back towards the cabana along the now empty esplanade. "Where is everybody?" asked Cooper, looking around.

"Thais go to bed early."

"What about the ferungs . . .?"

"They get double rooms in a hotel . . ."

"Ouch!" said Cooper, laughing in spite of himself.

At the cabana Cooper said, "It's too nice to go in yet. This pudee ferung is going to drag out a beach chair and mix some drinks." Settled in their chairs, listening to the rhythmic splash of the surf and looking at the stars which hung heavily and luminous over the water, Cooper raised his glass. "Here's to us, Prasert-san."

"If you are going to start drinking toasts, the first one should be to the King," said Prasert, lightly.

"Okay. To the King." Cooper raised his glass and Prasert responded.

They sat watching the moon as it rose and touched the pulsing immensity of darkness with silver. Far off on the horizon the silhouette of a vessel moving through the pale vacuity accentuated the depth of the scene.

Prasert reached over and flicked on the radio. The silence was broken by the soft, monotonous throbbing of drums, lanced by muted wailings of a fife, the sound woven into a fabric of melody by the viols. There was a quiet persistence to the music, overtones of some vague, aching melancholy. The scent of night-blooming cereus filled the air with sharp sweetness and Cooper felt as though he had been waiting for this night all his life.

"I saw your King the other day," he said, disturbing the dreamlike atmosphere. "Just for a few minutes. He was

presenting swords to the graduating class at the Officers' Candidate School. It was very impressive."

"Is that the first time you have seen him?"

"Yes."

"What did you think?"

"Prasert, is he very popular?"

"He is the King. What difference does it make if he is popular or not?"

"It was rather strange. He's quite young—in his twenties. Everybody knows he's a songwriter and he plays band instruments. He was educated in Massachusetts. But that day he sat there as each new officer knelt before him to receive the sword and his face was a mask. Like a Buddha. He never even nodded his head as he handed the sword to each man."

"What should he do? Jump up and make like the prize-fighter with the hands over the head?" asked Prasert.

"No!" said Cooper, laughing. "That's not what I meant. But I've seen Queen Elizabeth at ceremonies and she nods and smiles."

"This is the Orient, Jim. The King represents the country to heaven. If he is good, then the country has good fortune. If not, they have troubles. It is not what he *does*, it is what he *is*."

"He doesn't have much power, though," said Cooper. "The Prime Minister runs the country. He's a figurehead . . ."

Prasert sighed. "It is difficult to explain. To the coup party he is a figurehead. But to us he is something different. He *is* Thailand. Like your flag. When we bow to him, we bow to our homeland, our ancestors. So he would be pudee if he shook the hands and kissed the babies. He is Thailand, not Tony Curtis in the person."

Cooper stirred his drink, remembering the impassive young man, sitting so straight and motionless under the tiered golden umbrella. "I'll say one thing. I never could imagine him playing a saxophone . . . not that day!"

The next morning, after an early swim in the sea, now

flattened by a heavy calm to glassy opaqueness, they walked down the esplanade until they found an old Thai woman crouched over a pannier of crushed ice and they breakfasted on iced pomelos that left a cool, sharp flavour in their mouths. Later they sprawled on the sand under the blazing globe of sea and sky, Prasert with a *pakoma* wrapped around his face to prevent it from burning. A Thai Army truck rolled down the beach along the water's edge; it was filled with laughing Thai soldiers. Cooper sat up. "Why don't they get out and run around?"

Prasert uncovered his head and looked at the truck. "In the hot sun? What for?"

Cooper was silent. He was imagining a day at the beach for an American Army unit. Roll call, a seat for every man, safety belt across the tailgate, a mess truck complete with sergeant, cooks, tent fly, burners, trays, knives and forks, trash cans. A tent for dressing and undressing. Roll call at the beach, buddy system for swimming, noon meal of salad, meat, potatoes. Ice cream in dry-iced cans. There would be athletic equipment for playing softball and badminton, a gramophone and records. Beer for those old enough to drink, soft drinks for the others. A notebook to record the names of those men who managed to get a can of unauthorised beer.

The truck roared past the cabana and the laughter reached the two men on the sand. "You are comparing the Thai soldiers with the Americans," said Prasert from under his *pakoma*.

"As a matter of fact, I was."

"And you are finding them much different."

"Yes."

"You think your army truck is being wasted on them?"

"No," said Cooper. "Maybe I would have thought so once. Not any more."

After lunch, Prasert said, "I have a present for you which I hope you will like." He rummaged around in his bag and brought out a tablet with two books. "Here they are," he

said, shyly, and handed Cooper the items. One book was on Thai history and the other was a language manual.

"You must learn Thai to really understand us," he said. "That history book is not very reliable but it's the best we have. You should read it."

Cooper noticed that the books were new and, for Prasert, relatively expensive. He turned to the slight figure beside him. "Prasert^๕san, you shouldn't have done this. But I do appreciate it. Very much. Thank you."

"Thanks are not necessary. Just learn!"

During the late afternoon, Cooper wanted Prasert to come out on the sand with him while he worked on getting a tan. Prasert declined with thanks. "Only farmers are brown," he said. "If you want so much to have the dark skin, I will take you to the wat where the priest will mix something in a big jar. You sit in the jar. For the rest of your life you will be dark brown. All over. It will never come off."

"Christ, what is it?"

"I do not know. It is secret."

"Thanks for the suggestion, but I'm too chicken. I'll compromise on suntan lotion and Old Sol."

They left Bang San for the drive back to Bangkok too tired to do very much talking. Finally Cooper broke the drowsy silence. "Come to think of it, what happened at the Ministry of Commerce the other night? You were telling me about all the lights being on . . ."

Prasert opened one eye and shrugged. "False alarm. But something is going to happen, maybe soon."

"How do you know?"

"I can tell. I think what makes them hold back is General Mason. They do not understand him. With him there is no 'screwing around' and they are not so sure about Colonel White."

"What do you mean?"

"Maybe they think that something will happen between Colonel White and the General. Already they know that White will not let the General fly the Thai flag on the left."

"What?" asked Cooper, incredulously.

"Please, Jimmy. I do not like to talk about it. I only hear what they say from the outside. I don't really know."

"You mean somebody in MAAG talks to outsiders?"

"It is not necessary for anybody to talk. Many Thais work in your office. Telephone operators, drivers, cleaning-up people."

"But Christ almighty! They've got the wrong dope. Believe me, the General is the boss. He didn't want the flags flown unless the American flag was in the proper place . . ."

"I know that, Jimmy. Please, I don't want to be involved. But now they don't fly any flags at all. The Thais think it is because Colonel White will not let it be done. What else can they think? Maybe he told somebody. I don't know."

"You mean that the Thais notice things like that?"

Prasert nodded.

The car had entered the outskirts of the city where Sunday traffic was heaviest. Buses, sam-lors, bullock carts, Chinese vendors with long poles slung over their shoulders, combined to fill the street. Cooper kept the horn in continual operation. "Jesus Christ!" he would yell. "Goddamn him! Did you see that clown step right in front of me?" After a few moments of this, Prasert said, "What does 'heng sui' mean?"

"High class. *Look at that dumbell!*"

"And what does 'pudee' mean?"

"Low class. *That silly son of a bitch!*"

"Mankaprun?"

"Jellyfish."

"Taparote?"

"Pineapple."

In about fifteen minutes the car turned into the relatively deserted Radjdarnneron Boulevard. Cooper looked at Prasert. "Thanks, Prasert. And I am sorry."

“You should not lose your temper like that, Jimmy. Only dogs and ferungs lose their temper.”

Cooper smiled as the Vauxhall turned into the Chakri parking lot. “That was a hell of a nice weekend,” he said, “let’s do it again sometime.”

8

Mrs. Mason had borrowed Cooper’s car and driver for the house-hunting tour. The little green Vauxhall rolled away from the Chakri Hotel one sunny morning with her and Mrs. White in the back seat, Mrs. White fumbling through a list of available houses which she had compiled from various sources.

“First of all, Eleanor,” said Mrs. White, “ah want you to see a place suggested to me by Prince Dhardi. He’s one of the old guard, you know. You probably won’t want it, but ah really don’t think we should disappoint the old dear . . .”

It turned out to be a small, dilapidated wooden palace with peeling yellow paint and an ornate entrance decorated with crumbling acanthus leaves. It was set in an unkempt park and was so obviously unsatisfactory that Mrs. Mason merely glanced at it and shook her head. Mrs. White grasped the opportunity to continue gushing about the Prince while the car moved around the drive without stopping and went on to her next address.

Most of the morning was spent looking at prospective houses with disappointing results. Several were on too grand a scale—huge old-fashioned homes requiring a staff of at least ten servants. Others were modern in design but either too far from MAAG or in too noisy a neighbourhood.

The last house on the list was near MAAG, on a narrow dirt lane scarred with ruts and potholes. It was a Queen Anne-style wooden structure that had an upper story fussy with gazebos and dormer windows and an entrance framed in red, blue and green panes of glass.

Mrs. Mason, in desperation, was almost resigned to taking it when she saw, across the road, a house in the last stage of construction. It was L-shaped and built of tan brick with teak trim and a red tile roof. "Beautiful!" she exclaimed. "Frank Lloyd Wright, almost. I wonder if it's for rent."

They drove into the compound and talked with the Thai foreman, who explained that it belonged to a Prince Yuthakan and was scheduled for completion in a couple of days. It had all the features that Mrs. Mason was looking for. A large lanai in the back was suitable for entertaining, the servants' quarters were conveniently located in the rear and it was close to MAAG headquarters.

"I'm afraid the rent will be more than you're allowed, Eleanor," said Mrs. White.

"Come to think about it, Emily," said Mrs. Mason, "how do you manage? Surely your rent is more than your allowance?"

Mrs. White was momentarily perturbed. "Well, our house is . . . what you might say . . . a private arrangement. It belongs to the Ministry of Commerce. Alvin handled it. I really don't know all the details."

"Ministry of Commerce? That's Marshal Wicharn, isn't it?"

Mrs. White nodded and Mrs. Mason dropped the subject. "I like this one very much."

"Let me call Prince Yuthakan for you, Eleanor," said Mrs. White. "I've met him and his wife. They're characters, both of them. And they'll strike a hard bargain."

Mrs. Mason agreed. When she returned to the Chakri she called the General and asked him to look it over on his way home.

That evening, as Prince and Princess Yuthakan sat in the living room of their mansion, the Princess mentioned the phone call from Mrs. White about the new house. That dwelling had been designed for their own use so they could close up the expensive and old-fashioned mansion they were occupying.

"Well, what do you think?" asked the Princess, lighting a

cigarette. The Prince sat back in his chair. He had the short stature and dark golden skin of the Thai, but his husky build and slightly oversized features revealed Slavic blood; the big, bold face with the deep-set eyes belonged on windswept steppes rather than in the jasmine-scented bamboo groves of Thailand. He was the man who, but for a single decision at a conference of old royalty sixteen years before, would have been the King of Thailand. He could never, for a moment, accept or forget that bitter fact.

It had come about because his grandfather, while Ambassador to Czarist Russia, had married the daughter of a minor noble in the Romanoff court. Returning to Thailand, their sons and daughters intermarried with Thai royalty and all their names had found places in the spidery charts of the royal lineage—an incredibly complicated document which, until the turn of the century, had included the offspring of the fifty wives and countless children of each king.

Back in the thirties, the revolution had deposed Prajadapok. When he refused an offer of restoration as a constitutional monarch, it had been deemed necessary to appoint another member of the royal family.

On a fateful afternoon, in a crumbling old palace, a council of Thai nobility was called. It was dominated by a handful of half-forgotten princes and princesses of the blood, who arrived in antique limousines. These were the men and women whose father, seated cross-legged on the golden boat-shaped throne under the nine-tiered umbrella, had been carried among his subjects, his palanquin resting on the backs of fifty men while no Siamese dared raise his face from the dust.

When the vote had narrowed down to two names—Prince Yuthakan and his cousin—they had, with faltering voices, nominated his cousin. Prince Yuthakan blamed his defeat on that infusion of alien blood two generations before.

The Prince turned to his wife and said, "Let them have the house."

"For how much?"

"Nine thousand ticals."

"If that's too much?"

"Insist."

"And if they don't accept . . .?"

He shrugged. "What is a General's rental allowance?"

She paused for a moment. "Five thousand ticals."

"Then not less than seven thousand."

She nodded. If the Masons wanted the house, she knew they would have to pay the equivalent of one hundred dollars in addition to their regular rental allowance.

"They'll be here tomorrow afternoon."

Promptly at four the next afternoon, the General's limousine drove up to the Yuthakan house. The Masons were met at the entrance by a Thai servant who bowed low and guided them down a long passage, lined with oil paintings of Thai royalty, to the large double doors of a salon which he ceremoniously opened.

Standing beside the yellow-silk settee were the Prince and Princess. He was wearing a Western-style jacket and a panung, the traditional Thai garb consisting of several yards of dark silk wrapped around the loins and drawn up between the knees creating the effect of loose breeches.

"Good evening, General," said the Prince and extended a swarthy, heavy hand. When the introductions were completed, the Prince motioned towards the chairs and then lightly clapped his hands. In a moment, a Thai maid appeared in the doorway and, dropping to her knees, approached them in that fashion.

"What will you have to drink?" asked the Prince. When they had ordered, they sat back and, after a few amenities, the Princess took over. "We understand, General," she said, "that you and Mrs. Mason would like to rent our house on Sunawin Lane?"

"Yes," said the General. "We've looked it over. It's well

designed and it's near MAAG. If it's available, we'd like to talk about renting it."

"Actually," said the Prince, "we built it to use ourselves . . ."

"... However," said the Princess, picking up the cue, "His Highness has taken cognisance of your needs and is willing to consider renting it to you."

The General nodded his head in acknowledgment.

"Since the house is new," she continued, "we feel justified in asking a fair rental."

"Of course . . .," the Prince broke in, "if the rent should prove to be too high, we will understand."

There was a pause. General and Mrs. Mason glanced at each other. They had caught the sales pitch.

"Therefore," continued the Princess, momentarily at a disadvantage because of their silence, "we would consider renting it for nine thousand ticals a month."

The General considered for a moment. "I'm afraid nine thousand is a bit too high," he said.

"But we understand that you are granted a rental allowance . . .," said the Princess.

Again the General and Mrs. Mason glanced at each other. Evidently the entire world was familiar with American armed forces' rental allowances!

"My rental allowance is only five thousand ticals," he replied.

"Then we are actually discussing a difference of four thousand ticals," said the Prince with a deprecating smile.

"No, we're not," replied the General. "My allowance is considered part of my salary. We are still talking about nine thousand ticals rent per month."

There was another silence as the Prince extended a humidor which the General refused. "I'm afraid nine thousand is a bit too high," reiterated the General.

"You said 'a bit,' " said the Princess, smiling. "What do you consider 'a bit'?"

"Four thousand ticals," said the General, and the others joined in polite laughter.

"Well," said the Prince, lighting a cigar. "Why don't we just split the difference . . . and make it two thousand ticals . . ."

The General smiled. "We might be real friendly and split *that* difference . . . and make it a thousand."

"Fifteen hundred!" interjected the Princess quickly.

"Sold!" said the General and they relaxed while the Princess clapped her hands for the servant.

"Have you been to the Sports Club races yet?" asked the Prince.

General Mason quietly studied his host during the rest of their visit. From questions he had asked prior to meeting his potential landlord he had gathered that Prince Yuthakan lived proudly apart from his poorer relatives, who resided contentedly along quiet klongs on tiny incomes received from the Rothschild banks, shares in the Suez Canal, obscure European state railways and French vineyards. These financial trickles—all that was left of the great golden flood of former years—were barely enough to support a society satisfied to move in mouldy drawing rooms surrounded by dusty tapestries and bric-à-brac.

The General had learned further that the Prince and his sloe-eyed wife were cannily increasing their wealth not only by transferring their holdings to plastics, uranium mines, electronics, and the like, but also by acquiring from these same unworldly relatives their remaining bits of Bangkok property which, under manipulation, had become the sites of new hotels, banks and cinemas.

The General was told stories of this malevolent man with the strong face who ostentatiously wore the panung to all social and official functions as a reminder of his dispossession. He had also heard of the precipitous departures from cocktail parties when the Prince felt the guests had not shown him sufficient deference, and the times he had stalked out of formal dinner

parties where his seat at the table was not *comme il faut*.

He concluded that it was not necessarily the foreign blood which had kept the Prince from the Crown. The coup party was smart, he reflected, to keep this rugged, sardonic figure from the throne. It served their purpose much better to have a quiet, sensitive man—a descendant of that branch which had produced poet Rama VI and the gentle Prajadapok.

Yuthakan revealed to his guests his disdain for the current Thai ruling clique—children, he termed them. The General realised that the Prince was of the *condottiere* tradition. Like the Medicis and the Sforzas, he would have done the same things, but his rapacity would have been disguised under the trappings of law and order.

In his conversation, the Prince hinted that his only opponent in his real estate chicaneries was his own grandmother, the old Romanoff, Princess Rangsarit, who for some perverse reason championed the helpless, gentle old royalty.

On their way home, the General was in a thoughtful mood. "Eleanor," he said, "tonight I met the first Thai who knows the score. It's too bad people like him aren't running things in Thailand." As he spoke he was thinking of the subtle face of the Prime Minister.

Mrs. Mason smiled. Back in the drawing room, she had recognised the kinship between the two men. She also knew that they were too much alike to be anything but implacable enemies. Softly she patted his hand and changed the subject. "The house will be very nice," she said. "I'm so glad we got it."

9

General Mason called Cooper and Colonel White into the birdcage and, producing a notebook, asked White to take some notes. Cooper recognised the procedure as the first tightening of the screws.

The General wanted to know the basis for instructions regarding the wearing of civilian clothes by MAAG personnel during duty hours.

"That's entirely up to the commander," said White. "Colonel Carpenter, when he was Chief, felt it would be less conspicuous if we wore civilian clothes around Bangkok. I agreed with him and I know the Thais prefer it, except of course at official functions. Our presence here is less obvious."

"Since the Thais wear uniforms I don't think it's a very good idea."

"You mean that we are at a psychological disadvantage?"

The General glanced at him. "Put it however you like. But it's still a bad idea. I want our people to wear duty uniforms."

Colonel White crossed his legs and sat back. "The Thais may not like it, sir."

The General shrugged and consulted his notebook again.

"I'll have to check and see how long it will take to get everyone into uniform . . ."

"All personnel brought uniforms when they came, didn't they?"

"Yes, sir, but they haven't been worn in . . ."

"I'll give them a week. By next Monday, uniforms will be worn."

The Colonel made a note on his pad.

"Now about the maintenance of this building. Who is responsible for that?"

"The Thai Army, sir. It's part of the agreement. They painted the outside when we moved in here."

"The inside is pretty shabby, especially the floors."

"Colonel Carpenter didn't feel that we should insist too much on their spending money on plush headquarters for . . ."

"Goddamn it, White, I'm not talking about 'plush' headquarters! I'm referring to paint, window glass and light bulbs!"

"I'm sorry, sir. What I meant was that when we first came in, the whole idea was to keep it simple and unobtrusive. That's why there's no sign out front . . ."

"Thanks for reminding me! I want a sign made up so people can find this place. We're not in hiding. And you will contact whoever is responsible and tell them that I want the inside of this building repaired and painted. I've noticed that the motor park is muddy when it rains. So tell them to put some crushed rock in there, too."

"Yes, sir," said the Colonel.

"Another thing," continued the General, "I don't like the layout here. We waste too much space. Figure out a plan for rearranging the headquarters. Get me out of this birdcage and put me somewhere up front with an adjoining room for Cooper and the stenographer. While you're at it, get rid of that waiting room downstairs, too."

"Sir, it's the only place where dependants can get their mail and contact MAAG..."

"I want the women and children out of the headquarters. If they have to pick up mail, set up the post office out on the porch."

"Yes, sir. Do you have any particular place where you'd like your office?" It was apparent that White wanted to avoid complaints from the various sections.

The General levelled a look at him. "I asked *you* to come up with the ideas."

"Yes, sir."

The next topic was the General's impending visits to the Thai military units around Bangkok, a prelude to a formal Joint Defence meeting of all the Thai chiefs and MAAG personnel. White pointed out that the General's inspection would start the following day.

"Well, I guess that about does it," said the General, tossing his notebook on the desk. "I have one more question. Who is responsible for the snack bar?"

"It's a concession of the American Club," said White with a touch of pride. "I set it up myself."

"Who inspects it?"

"Why... I look in on them occasionally..."

"Well, I disapprove of the location for one thing. Let's see if they can't be moved into the shed out at the back. And what about the menu? Cooper, you eat there a lot. Is it satisfactory?"

"Your choice is limited to sugar doughnuts and whipped-cream cakes . . .," said Cooper.

"How about that, White? Why can't they stock hamburgers or sandwiches? I don't like the idea of whipped cream in the tropics. It's dangerous."

Colonel White shot a malevolent glance at Cooper. "Most of the officers eat at the Sports Club so the question hasn't come up before. I'll check on it. The American Club doesn't make money on the concession. They're doing it as a favour, really. I'm afraid if we make too much of an issue of it, they'll pack up and leave."

"Then let them go. We'll find somebody else!"

"Yes, sir. I'll check it."

"There was something else . . . where the hell is that note . . .?" Cooper winced, watching the General shuffle the papers on his desk.

"Oh, yes, here it is. Cooper reminds me that no flags have been flown since I got here. How about that, White? I thought we had straightened it out?"

Colonel White took off his glasses and rubbed his eyes. Something about the evasive gesture convinced Cooper that Prasert's hint had been right.

"As a matter of fact," said White, finally, "the flags were getting pretty ragged. We're getting another American flag now. And the Thais are supposed to give us a new one."

"In that case," said the General, "contact the Embassy and borrow one of theirs until our new one arrives. Have both flags flown—and properly—beginning tomorrow. If the Thais don't like to see their flag in tatters, let them give us a new one."

"Yes, sir."

When they left the birdcage, Cooper turned to White. "Sir, about the snack bar . . . I didn't mean . . ."

White spun around. "I wish, Captain," he said, "that you'd

be kind enough to handle these things with me direct. There's no reason to worry the General about whipped-cream cakes!"

"Sir, he specifically asked me . . .," and then Cooper stopped. It was no use.

He went downstairs and found Mannon. He explained at length about the flags. "Come here," said Mannon and took Cooper over to a filing cabinet where the flags were kept. They spread them out. Both were in near perfect condition.

"Leave it to me," said Mannon with a grin. "By the dawn's early light tomorrow morning, they'll both be flying!"

For Cooper the balance of the week became a kaleidoscope of handshakings . . . ruffles and flourishes . . . miles of troops lined up for inspection . . . hours of briefings and hundreds of Cokes. At his desk on Saturday morning, he sorted out his collection of brochures, tables of organisation, briefing notes. Several items stood out. General Mason's relentless questioning had, many times, uncovered the fact that some of the organisations shown on the beautifully executed charts existed only in token form. Many of the best units, including tanks and artillery, were stationed in and around Bangkok rather than along the border. The Thais wanted only the newest and largest military equipment, regardless of its eventual use on a restricted road net.

In his notebook was a name . . . Captain Sawat. During a briefing at Army headquarters the captain had acted as interpreter. Cooper had made up his mind that he would be the General's new Thai aide.

10

Cooper had planned to go to the Thai boxing matches with Prasert on Saturday evening, but Prasert called the night before to tell him that his Ministry was holding a special reception for some visiting American officials and he had been instructed to attend.

Cooper was whistling while he shaved in the bathroom when he heard a knock on the hotel-room door. "Come in," he called out, thinking it was the room boy with the laundry. But it was Prasert, resplendent in a white dinner jacket, wearing his Thai medals. The ostensible reason for his visit was to borrow a pair of cuff links, but Cooper suspected the real purpose was to let him know that Thai officials could also dress up for formal occasions.

"You're a handsome Thai, Prasert-san," he said, standing in the doorway of the bathroom with a towel around his middle.

Prasert smiled and stood preening in front of the dresser mirror, adjusting the cuff links. "Not so bad, huh?"

"Better watch out for the beautiful girls . . ."

"Beautiful girls? At a Ministry party? You mean Thai wives! Number One wives!"

"In that case you'd better be even more careful."

"It is you who should be careful. You will go out alone tonight. I will not be there to guide you on the eightfold path!"

After Prasert had gone, Cooper finished dressing and went downstairs. After cancelling the boxing tickets at the hotel desk, he made his nightly pilgrimage to the cocktail lounge to see if, by any chance, Tong hai was there. There was something about his gossamer encounter almost two months before that had left a memory haunting as the scent of mali.

The lounge was filled with people but she had not come. Disappointed, he had turned to leave when suddenly he saw her, standing in the doorway, wearing a yellow silk dress and a string of baroque pearls around her neck which accentuated her pale-gold features and wide luminous eyes.

He tried to keep his eagerness in check as she walked towards him.

"Tongchai!" he said.

"Good evening, Captain Cooper," she replied, with a slight smile, and he felt the sudden warmth in his cheeks at the thought that she had remembered his name.

"Would you join me?" he asked. Her eyes flickered over him for a moment and then she smiled. They found seats at one of the leather-covered tables.

"It's nice to see you again," said Cooper. For him the evening had already become sheer adventure. "You look beautiful."

"I am not so sure that you are saying the truth," she smiled, "but it is nice to hear."

"What would you like to drink?"

They chose martinis and after the first sip, Cooper sat back, a warm glow stealing through him. "I've been waiting to see you again."

"You are making a joke?"

"No, I'm not. I've looked for you in here every day."

She traced a circle on the leather tabletop with her finger.

"I must tell you something," she said. "When you saw me before, that was the first time I have come in here."

"Why didn't you come back?"

She looked up at him with long, shining eyes. "I do not want that you should think I am . . . the . . . pick-up."

"Tongchai, if I thought that, why should I wait for you? For that, I could go down to New Road any time . . ."

She didn't answer but smiled modestly while they sipped their drinks. He glanced down at her small golden hand resting beside his on the table. Then, without any coquetry, she gently ran her finger over the back of his left hand. The touch of her cool finger was like a stroke of flame. "You have not got a wedding ring on your hand," she said.

"I am not married."

She looked up at him out of the corner of her eye. "Maybe you are married in America?"

He shook his head. "Believe me, if I were, I would wear the ring. How about you?" and he took her hand in his. "I thought all Thai girls married when they were very young?"

"Sometimes. But maybe I have not fallen into love . . ."

"My Thai friend tells me that Siamese don't fall in love. That's an American custom."

She smiled. "Your Thai friend must be a man and maybe he is a little bit stupid."

"But he isn't. He's clever. A doctor of philosophy. And he's heng sui."

She laughed and withdrew her hand. "The last time I see you, you are new in Thailand. Now you know about 'heng sui.' Who told you this? Some Thai girl?"

"No. I am learning to speak Thai. How about 'Bai ban rup louk sahao . . .'"

Again she laughed, delightedly. "That means, 'Go and fetch the wife of the Chief.' Why do you learn this?"

"I am in MAAG. I work for General Mason and this is what I tell his driver to do."

"He is the tall man who lives in the hotel? Very stern! And he has the beautiful wife . . .?"

"That's the one."

"But why do you not also have a wife?" she looked at him appraisingly. "You are handsome and you have ferung eyes. Maybe many American girls like you very much."

"I haven't had time."

She smiled reprovingly. "You make fun with me!"

"Look," he said, suddenly. "Why not have dinner with me? How would you like to go to the Chez Eve?"

Her eyes lighted up. "But I am not dressed for . . ."

"Nonsense," he interrupted. "Of course you are. But if you don't like that, how about Dick's Restaurant? I've never been there."

"Dick's?" She hesitated but he could see she wanted to go.

"Come on," he said. "I've got my car outside. Afterwards, maybe we could go someplace and dance . . ."

That did it. "I would like to do this very much," she said, rising and taking his arm.

Dick's Restaurant was on the far side of town, hidden away in a stand of banyan trees near a klong, in what had once been a rich Chinese comprador's mansion. It had a wide

front porch and a panelled living room painted light green and decorated with Bavarian murals. Dick advertised that his was the only Bavarian Restaurant between Honolulu and Beirut. And Dick himself belonged to the demi-monde of Bangkok . . . a stolid Prussian with hair en brosse and a monocle. He had operated a German-style restaurant in Bangkok almost as long as anyone could remember and was reputed to be a close friend of the coup-party group. Many fabulous deals were rumoured to have been consummated in the upstairs rooms of the mansion in the shade of the ragged banyan trees. Since Dick, wisely, neither affirmed nor denied anything, the speculations merely added a touch of the sinister to his already mysterious reputation. It was quite *recherché* to be one of the customers recognised during dinner by Dick, who would stop by the table with a heel-clicking bow and a guttural "Goot efening, Excellency."

When Cooper and Tongchai arrived, the dining room was just starting to fill up. They skirted the bar, a circular affair in the centre of the room, and were heading for an empty table when Cooper heard himself hailed from a corner. He turned and saw Lieutenant Colonel Childs and a blonde woman, seated at a table with Mannon. He acknowledged the greeting with a twinge of annoyance. He wanted to be alone with Tongchai.

"Come on over," called out Childs, expansively.

At the table, Colonel Childs introduced the blonde woman as his wife, Natalie. She was about twenty-five and flashed a wide, schoolgirl smile. Then he introduced "Major" Mannon. The promotion, he said, had come through that afternoon and the dinner was to celebrate.

Cooper congratulated Mannon, and Childs looked at him with an arch smile on his plump face. "Unless this is a *tête à tête*," he said, smirking at Tongchai, "why don't you join us?"

Cooper, still embarrassed at the encounter in the Thieves' Market, had started to say "No, thanks" but caught a glimpse of Mannon's face with its mute appeal to stay. After a glance

at Tongchai and her answering nod, they seated themselves at the table.

"Frank is leaving Bangkok soon. He's asked to be transferred to the Parachute School up-country," said the Colonel. Cooper sensed a touch of relief in his voice. "Frank's a Master Parachutist, you know."

Cooper nodded. The Colonel continued, "I wanted to meet Dick but I guess he's not here tonight."

Mannon broke in. "This is even better. Tonight we have the two most beautiful girls in Bangkok at our table."

Tongchai smiled. "Before tonight," she said, "I am always afraid of MAAG men because they are so very stern ! But now I am not so sure."

"Thanks, Miss Tongchai," said Mannon, "for recognising that the MAAG men are really lovable boys."

They laughed and Mrs. Childs leaned forward. "Tongchai," she said, "remind me to tell you all about these MAAG boys some day !"

"You mean they are the tiger in the coat of the sheep?" asked Tongchai.

"Something like that," laughed Mrs. Childs, "or vice versa."

They ordered drinks and, a bit later, the Weinerschnitzel.

"Cooked by a Japanese, supervised by a German, served by Chinese to a Thai and four Americans," said Childs. "Just how international can we get !" The Colonel thoroughly enjoyed his role as host. He ordered wine and, after the waiter had poured some in his glass, he sipped it and gravely shook his head. The waiter immediately removed the bottle and carried it to the bar in the centre of the room. Cooper, sitting in a position to see the bar, watched the pantomime in which the bartender, after some sleight-of-hand, 'apparently placed the same bottle back on the tray. The waiter returned and after the Colonel had repeated the ceremony, nodding this time, he solemnly filled the rest of the glasses. Cooper, glancing at Mannon, caught a malicious gleam in the new Major's eye.

During the meal, Colonel Childs explained to the rest of the party about Cooper's help in the Thieves' Market when he was purchasing his Buddha head. The Colonel's version was light and witty enough to make Cooper wonder, for one wild moment, whether his own recollection of the sordid episode could possibly be true.

"I was hoping that Renee would be here tonight so we might look over his daubs and see if there's anything amusing," continued the Colonel. He turned to Cooper. "You know Renee, of course?" Cooper confessed he did not. "He's a beachcomber that Dick had added to his collection of weirdos," he continued in a confidential manner. "He did those murals on the wall. He also does easel pictures . . . when he's sober. He's not a genius or anything, but some of his canvases have a certain flair . . ."

During dessert, the Colonel indicated a man entering the dining room in a nondescript sports shirt, unpressed slacks and a pair of scuffed sandals. "That's Renee now," he said.

The man stood in the centre of the room, looking around. With a wide, splayed hand, he smoothed back his thinning hair. "Renee!" called out Childs. "How about joining us?"

The man came over to the table and was introduced. The Colonel pulled up a chair for him. He sat down with a slow smile which revealed a row of long, horse teeth. "You 'ave not been here before, eh?" he asked Cooper.

The Captain shook his head. "I understand you paint," he said.

Renee shrugged. "Painting ees my 'obby," and he cracked his large knuckles. "But my real work ees . . . how you say eet . . . the pursuit of 'appiness. Thees ees not so simple . . . one must work very hard at eet . . .," and he laughed.

"Let me know when you start gaining on it," said Mannon.

Renee turned back towards the bar, where several men were assembled, evidently waiting for him. "Before you take off," said the Colonel, intercepting the look, "I wonder if we might have a look at your work?"

"I 'ave nothing new, *mon Colonel*, but eef you wish . . ."

He rose and after Childs had signalled for the waiter to hold their table, they followed the painter through the dining room and up a dark stairway to the second floor. It consisted of a main salon, with an open veranda at both ends. Renee opened one of the doors lining the long room and flicked a switch. A dim light revealed an untidy bedroom, with an unmade bed in one corner and several battered chairs drawn up around a coffee table which held the remains of a bottle of whiskey and a plate of half-eaten mangoes.

"There they are," he said, pointing to a stack of canvases leaning against an old armoire. "Perhaps there ees something you will like." He lit a cigarette.

"This light is terrible, Renee," said the Colonel petulantly as he held up a canvas of a temple scene.

Renee smiled. "Per'aps eet ees better that way!"

Then Cooper noticed, in a corner, a small canvas propped up on a chair. He and Tongchai walked over to look at it.

A nude Thai girl was lying on a rattan-covered pallet in a shack, looking up at the viewer with a provocative smile on her lovely face, her eyes holding a subtle challenge in their brooding depths. There was a fierce, sensuous beauty in her golden limbs, round and soft and fashioned for love, enhanced by the suggestion of superb indifference. Standing in the doorway behind her was a man, a Westerner, in a long frock coat. He could have been anyone . . . a seaman or a missionary or a beachcomber. The doorway framed his gaunt figure like a guillotine. His taut face and burning eyes were those of a man drawn here against his will, in passion and despair.

It was a disturbing picture. Looking at it, Cooper sensed what its creation had cost the clumsy man with the homely face and the shabby sandals. In the painting of it, he had somehow atoned for the sins of men who had ravished the East, the unthinking rapacity of generations of Europeans and the tight, righteous smiles of their *memsahibs*.

He turned to find Renee watching him with narrowed eyes.

Before he could speak, the Frenchman shook his head. "I am sorry," he murmured, "but that one ees not for sale." Seeing the look of disappointment on Cooper's face he added, as though to soften his refusal . . . "I 'ave call eet 'Prenez Garde!'" and his eyes surveyed Cooper and Tongchai with a meaningful look.

Back at the table again, Cooper and Tongchai bade the Childs and Mannon goodnight. To his delight, Tongchai had whispered that she would like to go to the Chez Eve after all.

The Chez Eve was a small nightclub in downtown Bangkok, featuring an American orchestra. Its clientele, although polyglot, catered chiefly to American tastes. The air conditioning was almost frigid and the décor, self-consciously New York, included a long mural behind the bar. The mural consisted of a series of panels, executed in modern primitive style, and depicted the story of Adam and Eve. Cooper noticed, however, that the final panel showed Adam offering the apple to Eve and he wondered just what Oriental subtlety had prompted the change in the legend.

The room was dark and Cooper did not recognise any of the customers with the exception of one woman, seated at the head of a long table, her red hair and glittering gown distinguishable even in the half-light. He pointed her out to Tongchai.

"Oh, yes," she replied. "That is the Princess Rangsarit. Do you know her?"

"No, I saw her once before, that's all."

"She has offered the university library a valuable book. My father was supposed to accept it but he has asked me to represent him. Would you like to go with me to her palace when I pick it up?"

"Very much."

The nightclub was crowded but Cooper finally found a table, lighted by a candle floating in an amber bowl. Its wavering light caressed the pale gold of Tongchai's face and was

reflected in her lucent eyes. They ordered Alexanders and sipped the cool fire through the creamy froth. In the velvet darkness the air was sweet with the scent of ginger. Cooper felt as though he had waited his whole lifetime for this moment.

The orchestra was playing "Someday I'll Find You" and they waltzed. The lubricity of her silken-clad limbs against his own and the warmth of her body in his arms were almost unbearable. His breathing was noticeable enough for her to smile and whisper, "Please . . . people will look . . ."

Then, when the orchestra played a Ramwong, she showed him the steps of the native Siamese dance. Facing each other they slowly twisted and turned, her arms and fingers weaving in sinuous invitation, at once taunting and elusive. Cooper had seen the dance once before, in the Bamboo Bar, but the Admiral and his wife had evoked only the memory of desire . . . here was reality.

Back at the table again, she talked about her father, Nai Thanom. "Nai," she explained, was the fifth and last degree of royalty, five times removed from the king, each generation being demoted until at last the descendants became commoners. Cooper realised the necessity of this provision in the days when kings had numerous wives, lest their progeny eventually engulf the entire population of the nation.

She told him that her father, Nai Thanom, was a Professor of Humanities at the Chakri University and he still remembered his year at Princeton University in America, two decades before. As part of her Western-style education, he had arranged for her to stay with an aunt who had lived in London and Paris. When that esteemed lady died, Tongchai, accustomed by this time to Western living, had been allowed to remain by herself.

Although Cooper nodded and smiled when she talked, he could not take his eyes away from the sight of her slim fingers around the stem of her glass, and he held her other hand while she told him about her job. She was in the public

relations section of the Ministry of Interior where her boss was General Kawee, whom Cooper remembered meeting at Government House. When she first pronounced his name, he had her repeat "Jimmy" again and again, delighting in the way her voice slurred the first letter, as though it were a kind of secret between them.

Leaving the Chez Eve he drove to the cluster of one-story wooden buildings on the bank of the Chao Phya where she lived. She started to say goodnight in the car but he insisted on walking with her to the door, which she unlocked and they stepped into a large, moonlit room the far side of which was louvred and overlooked the great shimmering river.

Standing by the door, her body was outlined in silver. "Goodnight, Jimmy," she said, softly.

He moved towards her. "Goodnight, Tongchai," he said, putting his arms around her and kissing her. He could feel the beating of her heart as they stood, for a moment, in the aching sweetness of the night.

"Now you must go," she whispered.

"Just a few minutes," he said, huskily, a stab of desire in his loins, sharp as a Malay kris.

"No . . .," and she pulled away.

"One cigarette?"

She hesitated. "Then you must go."

He found the crumpled packet in his pocket. When he flicked his lighter she cupped her hands around his.

"What's the matter?" he asked as the flame revealed a look of pain in her eyes.

"I am sorry you have come here."

"Why?"

"Because my aunt has told me . . . with the ferung . . . one must say 'goodnight' at the door . . . because otherwise . . . they will think . . ."

"No, Tongchai. I don't know how to explain . . . come here." He took her arm and they moved to the louvred win-

dow. The river shimmered with phosphorescent sparks. Across the wide stretch of water tiny boats bobbed up and down, some of them with dancing paraffin flares on the deck. Overhead, the night was smouldering purple, drenched in a silver rain of stars. On the far bank they could see the Temple of the Dawn, a burnished flame against the radiant night sky. "Look," he said, "Thailand!"

"Do you know what it is?" she asked.

"The Wat Arun. Temple of the Dawn."

"It is only made of broken pots and dishes!"

"I know. I've seen it. But that doesn't matter. It's beautiful."

"In the moonlight," she said. "In the daytime, the ferungs laugh. You say it is Thailand. You are right. Maybe tomorrow you will laugh also . . ."

He took her in his arms. There was no way he could explain what he meant. Like the temple, she was part of the enchantment of the East. If it were an illusion, he knew it was far more desirable than any reality he had ever known.

"Tongchai," he murmured, holding her tightly and crushing the lei of mali blossoms around her throat, "I love you . . ." She twisted in his arms and placed her fingertips against his mouth. "You must not say that . . .," and he saw her eyes, filled with love and a kind of fear.

"I want to."

"If you do not say the truth . . ."

"But I do. I love you, Tongchai. From the first time I saw you . . . in the hotel."

"Maybe you want . . . only my body . . ."

"Oh God, I want all of you, Tongchai." His lips found hers and she quivered as his tongue explored the tantalising warmth of her mouth. He kissed her cheeks, her eyelids, buried his mouth in the curve of her neck and as his lips moved towards the fullness of her breasts he heard her gasp, a quick spasm, of both invitation and denial.

"I am afraid," she whispered. "Tomorrow . . ."

"Never mind tomorrow !" he murmured, his lips against her smooth skin.

"People will look at my face, and they will know . . ."

"That I love you !" he said.

"Jimmy . . ." Her defences crumbled before the tide of desire and a few moments their bodies were lying, limb to limb, in trembling sensitivity. When he found that she had never known the act of love, he gentled his ministrations until her flawless body was quickened to unbearable frenzy. With his body he paid homage to the doll-like loveliness, revealing to her quivering virginity the deep delights of love, and both of them, helpless before the onslaught of the passion they had evoked, clung fiercely together in final, emissive embrace.

When Cooper awakened, strips of light were filtering through the louvres. Tongchai was curled up beside him and he could feel the warmth of her golden body. The early morning air held a faint shiver of coolness; she stirred in her sleep and he tightened his arm around her. He remembered Renee, the ugly artist in Dick's Restaurant the night before and his painting of the Thai girl. You were wrong, Renee, he thought to himself, with all your 'Prenez Garde!' nonsense. And it occurred to him that the mural over the Chez Eve bar was, in its quixotic way, closer to truth than the spiteful legend.

Tongchai awakened and when they looked into each other's eyes, they knew that the bond between them was indeluctable and complete. Each had known the other's naked need and their covenant, sealed in darkness, would set them apart from all other human beings for all time.

Cooper rose and dressed. Kneeling beside the bed, he took her in his arms. Gently their lips brushed.

As he walked up the path to his car in the bright sunshine, there was a kind of awakened awareness in his limbs. He softly whistled snatches of the Ramwong they had danced to. Just seven hours before, he mused. Or was it seven centuries?

One Monday morning, Colonel White brought in the long-awaited announcement that the first meeting of the Joint Defence Council of Thailand would be held the following week. He explained to Cooper that it would include all the Chiefs of the Services and the Prime Minister and would be held at Government House. This would give General Mason a chance to survey the military picture as a whole.

The General called in all the members of his staff to determine an agenda for the meeting. Colonel Harper of the Air Force wanted to discuss the subject of additional air wings. Commander Enright, prompted by a significant look from the General, suggested that the problem of the restoration of the Marines might be brought out in the open. Colonel Hawley had several items of Army interest. When they had finished, General Mason said that his chief topic of discussion would be a joint manoeuvre, utilising all Services.

As the General was speaking, Cooper noticed Colonel White puffing nervously on a cigarette. When the General had finished, he put down the cigarette. "You know, of course, sir, that this is a rather ticklish subject with the Thais . . . They've never held a joint manoeuvre."

"Well, it's high time they did."

"I'm not so sure that the situation is exactly right."

Cooper couldn't figure out what White was driving at but was impressed by his dogged insistence.

"Just what are you talking about, White," asked the General with a tinge of annoyance in his voice. Cooper saw the Army and Air Force Chiefs look away while Commander Enright elaborately tested the point of his pencil.

White's face flushed slightly. He tamped out his cigarette. "I am referring to the political situation, sir. I'm not sure Air

Marshal Wicharn, for instance, is too keen on co-operating with the Army . . .”

“For the love of Christ, why not?” asked the General. “Wicharn commands a tactical air force, not a bomber command. And the only use on God’s green earth for a tactical air force is to support the Army. If what you say is true, why are we talking about giving them more wings? Let’s get one thing straight right now. If no agreement is reached on joint manoeuvres and an air-ground school to teach the Army and Air Force to work together, then we’re all coming right back to this room and take a long, hard look at the whole set-up. And I’ll guarantee that some drastic changes will be made in the entire programme.”

The discussion broke up but Mason, White and Cooper remained to discuss the problem of notekeeping for the big meeting. It was decided that Cooper would make a complete transcript of the proceedings for the General. It would be checked for accuracy against the official version which, they assumed, would be made by the Thais.

That afternoon, several Thai officers reported into MAAG to be interviewed for the job of General Mason’s second aide. The man selected was Captain Sawat, whose name Cooper had written in his notebook during the Thai Army briefing. He was a well-built young Thai with close-cropped hair and an eager air. After Cooper had shown him where he would sit (at a desk next to his own), Sawat requested permission to sit downstairs in the Thai liaison office and come up on call.

Somewhat surprised, Cooper nevertheless agreed and later discussed the odd request with General Mason.

“I don’t understand,” said the General. “It would be a perfect opportunity for the Thais to find out just how we operate. I’m surprised. They don’t usually muff things like this.”

Cooper couldn’t help remembering Prasert’s remarks about the Thais’ knowledge of MAAG operations. Perhaps Sawat didn’t want to be identified with what he thought was a

struggle for power within MAAG. Or perhaps some shift in the balance of Thai power was imminent and Sawat wanted to be free in case MAAG support went to a particular side.

The General left his office a few hours early to check on the new house into which Mrs. Mason had moved that day. Mrs. White had helped her select the servants, and the staff included a Chinese couple to serve as cook and housekeeper, the driver and his wife.

When he arrived, the door was opened by the new maid. He noticed, with satisfaction, that the living- and dining-room furniture had arrived and was in place except for a few items such as rugs and pictures. After a quick walk around the ground floor, the maid informed him that Mrs. Mason was waiting for him upstairs.

They had decided that the two rooms on the upper floor with the connecting door would be converted into a bedroom-sitting-room sanctum. Here, in the sitting room, Mrs. Mason would have her desk, her sewing table and the telephone. It was an arrangement they had evolved since their daughter had married and left them. It was a kind of Shangri-La which always smelled pleasantly of perfume and coffee and sometimes sherry, where the Masons could withdraw for the privacy which became more precious with the passage of the years.

The General stepped in the door and saw that the two rooms were completely furnished. Mrs. Mason was standing by the window, a glass of sherry in her hand, waiting for him. She walked over and put her arms around him.

"We're home, Ed," she said simply, kissing him. She was wearing a blue-silk peignoir and, with his arms around her, once again they were Second Lieutenant and Mrs. Mason, in a tiny house at Fort Myers and he had just come in, tired from coaching the post football team all afternoon.

"Rough day?" she asked as they sat down.

"Finally heard from the Prime Minister about the first council meeting," he said. "Next Monday."

"Tropical worsted or whites?"

"Tropicals will be okay. With ribbons." He looked around. "Very nice. Maybe we ought to have an air conditioner. Did we pack ours?"

"Yes. I checked today. Household goods take about two months to get here. It should be here about now."

He got up and walked into the bedroom and slipped off his shirt and boots and came back dressed in a sports shirt and slippers. "Anything on the schedule for tonight?"

"Tonight is free."

"Good," he grunted and settled back beside her on the settee where she took one of his hands in hers. They sat together, she sipping her wine. She mentioned the events of the day . . . a new golf tournament at the Sports Club which she wanted him to enter. They discussed whether or not she should enter the women's singles. They talked about the new servants and decided that nothing about MAAG should be discussed outside the room. Then she mentioned an invitation from Emily White to drop in at their Sunday brunches.

"You know we'll want to be at the Sports Club on Sundays, Eleanor," he said. "Besides, why the hell can't the Whites just get up in the morning and eat breakfast like everybody else?"

"It's more than just brunch, Ed," she said. "I gathered that they invite the Thai brass over every Sunday. It sounds to me like Emily's idea of a prestige institution. You know . . . Sunday Brunch at the Whites' . . ."

"I'm sure Alvin enjoys it!" said the General with a snort. "I just don't think it's wise. These Thais are pretty cagey. That's why we shouldn't get involved with them. We've got all we can do just handling our duties. And I don't trust decisions made during Sunday brunch, whatever the hell that is!"

"All right, Ed," said Mrs. Mason, patting his hand. "I told her we were too busy anyhow. How about a sherry before dinner?"

"I'll get it, Eleanor," he said. Mrs. Mason sat back and

watched him pour a drink. She was in love. And she had been ever since that first moment, more than twenty-five years before, when she had seen Number 54 come out on the football field, handsome and tanned, the quarterback during that great year at the end of the twenties. She had come to New York from her father's ranch in California, a blonde, blue-eyed college girl. She had gone to the game only to please a friend at whose house she was staying. That night both of them had been invited to the victory dance and she had met the quiet, hazel-eyed young quarterback. She knew immediately that he was the man she was going to marry.

It hadn't been easy. His father was an officer who had served with brilliance in World War I and Edwin Mason was an only child. The young cadet was the object of his mother's fond, possessive love and his father's pride. Eleanor Morton began, way back then, to display the qualities necessary for an Army wife, for when she met Ed's family she realised that unless every one of his parents' dreams for him was fulfilled, the girl he married would be held responsible. Eleanor Morton, under all her girlish mannerisms, developed a will of vanadium.

They were married after Ed's graduation and went to his first post as Second Lieutenant and Mrs. Mason. She knew he was used to a perfectly run household and, in spite of the meagre lieutenant's pay, Mrs. Mason coped. She handled with finesse every social amenity. Quietly and serenely, she played the part of the young lieutenant's wife with the assurance of an Army brat. The wives of her husband's senior officers and his contemporaries were always welcomed at their house. She carefully noted idiosyncrasies; she never forgot names of children or favourite drinks.

Mrs. Mason had a genius for organisation. Noting the advantages of the smiling supervisor over the harried worker, she graduated from the latter class gracefully—and as soon as possible.

Usually one of the most beautiful young wives on any post,

she ran into some difficulties. To senior ladies she was the "lovely Eleanor" who atoned for her skill at riding and tennis by being readily available for such thankless jobs as managing the Thrift Shop, the Nursery and the ladies' committees of the Officers' Club. She was the willing chairlady for various fund-raising drives and graciously handed out good, stiff quotas to every participant.

When she became pregnant and had to curtail her activities, she took the opportunity to delve into the mysteries of Army Regulations, that library of thin pamphlets in fine print and tortuous English under which the Army operates. She carefully screened them, picking out the ones Ed should know, word for word. She studied infantry tactics and organisational charts until she knew the make-up of units from a squad to a field army. She worked with Ed as he studied at night. Every post conducted a never ending series of officers' schools. It was her ambition that Ed should be the top man in every one of them. Thanks to her research and moral support, and his own drive, he was.

Their child was a girl. Ed didn't seem to mind, although she was secretly disappointed. She had wanted a boy to continue the Mason tradition.

As Captain, Edwin began to demonstrate the qualities that would carry him beyond his contemporaries. He was not a particularly brilliant talker but he had always had rude good health and possessed a sturdy ego. Above all, he had the touch of ruthlessness that men recognised and respected.

He was able to pass the most dangerous point in a military man's career—when he must convert the qualities that make him a good company-grade officer into the more subtle channels of command. It is during this period that the average officer, beset with the cares of a growing family and already assured of a place in the hierarchy, must choose between continuing down the road of regular promotions and gradually increasing responsibilities, and that more perilous—and lonely—path that leads to the highest commands.

It was during those evening sessions in the quiet of their home that Eleanor Mason watched her husband make the decision to take the lonely path.

With the imminence of World War II came Ed's quick promotion to Major and Lieutenant Colonel and Mrs. Mason was able to demonstrate her real capabilities.

One of the big problems of any field-grade officer's lady involved the inevitable female preoccupation with gossip. Sometimes she found cliques within cliques and watched the unwary newcomers become enmeshed so deeply that it was impossible to break loose. For Eleanor Mason there was no such thing as compromise. When she had the opportunity, with murderous geniality, she simply and brutally smashed intrigues with a quiet comment and a laugh, combined with absolute indifference. It was the indifference which did the trick.

Edwin Mason became Colonel Mason and when he was a post commander, for the first time in many of their lives, families on the post could live and function without the corrosive pall of gossip. The Commander and his wife set the example by erecting about their lives a smooth, impenetrable façade. Even Cooper, after several years as aide, had never penetrated beyond that polished surface, and one of his valuable qualifications for his job was that, being a bachelor, he had no desire to do so. He made absolutely no demands upon their essential privacy and therefore was comfortable to have around.

Cooper had observed many things about the General that the older man didn't fully realise. He had seen the General under many circumstances and had come to know that behind the outwardly stolid appearance and somewhat canonical speech was a shrewd and adhesive mind. He knew that the General had an unfailing eye for spotting the inconsequential gestures wherein men disclosed their real feelings and thoughts, and he could sit back, impassively, to watch them reveal themselves.

He knew also that the General made an ally out of time. He had a trick of mentally "counting to ten" and often, during discussions, there would come an almost psychic pause when, before making a final decision, the General would suspend judgement just long enough for some mysterious meshing to take place. He suspected that General Mason's mind, schooled to move along lines of cause and effect, also had a touch of oriental all-round objectivity, a quality resembling intuition. It allowed him to make decisions—often apart from the apparent facts—that marked the real commander.

The General had also mastered time in its larger aspects. The Prime Minister's delay in calling a Joint Council meeting had begun to worry Colonel White and others on the staff. As the weeks passed it began to seem a studied rebuff. But General Mason had the monumental passivity of a Joffre. Having decided to wait for the Prime Minister to make the first move, his self-sufficiency sustained him where a more finely strung man might have wavered.

When the maid knocked on the door to announce dinner, the two of them, embracing on the settee, sprang apart as though they had been discovered *in flagrante delicto*. Laughing, Eleanor Mason wiped the lipstick from his mouth with her handkerchief, patted her hair into place, and the General and his wife prepared to go down to dinner.

12

When the MAAG party arrived at Government House for the first joint meeting of the Defence Council, the reception hall was crowded with Thai officers. General Mason and Captain Cooper were met by General Kawee, who took them directly into the Prime Minister's office.

The small, slim figure in a white uniform with the insignia of a field marshal on the shoulders smiled and rose as General Mason came in. He touched his fingers together and bowed

his head slightly in greeting and General Mason responded with a salute. "Good morning, General," he said and motioned to a gold-brocade settee and several chairs drawn up around a coffee table. The two of them sat down on the settee, Cooper and General Kawee taking seats facing them. Cooper opened his notebook and balanced it on one knee.

"Captain Cooper is my aide, Excellency," explained the General, "and, with your permission he will make notes."

"Of course," smiled the Prime Minister. "The admirer of our Thai flower arrangements!"

"Sir," said the General, his broad, tanned hands on his knees, "I want to thank you personally for all the courtesies my wife and I have received . . ." He was interrupted by General Kawee who translated his remarks into Thai. The Prime Minister, hands clasped in front of him, head inclined, listened. Cooper thought it strange that a translation should be necessary. General Mason gave no indication of surprise.

"You realise, Excellency," continued Mason, "that I am in an ambivalent position here. The MAAG is the result of an agreement between our two countries. As Chief, I have two responsibilities; one to my own country, the other to yours."

General Kawee translated and, after a moment of conversation with the Prime Minister, he replied, "His Excellency understands your dual position."

The General nodded. "I want you to know also that, should there ever be any differences of opinion between us which I feel should be brought to the attention of Washington, I will first discuss them with you. At no time will there be exchanges between me and my government on any controversial matters without your complete cognisance."

Cooper saw the Prime Minister's quick black eyes flicker over the burly figure beside him and he realised that the Prime Minister understood everything the General had said. The use of Kawee as interpreter evidently was a device to give him time to think.

"The Prime Minister," said Kawee after a quick exchange

in Thai, "appreciates your attitude. As one soldier to another, he admires your candour and wants you to know that he will reciprocate. Please feel free to talk directly with any individual in the Thai armed forces on any subject whatsoever. The Prime Minister relies completely on your good faith and judgment."

A Thai soldier appeared in the doorway with a tray of Cokes and after they were passed around, and a few more comments exchanged, General Kawee stood up. "I believe," he said with a glance at the Prime Minister, "that it is time for the meeting. As you say in America, 'Let's get the show on the road!'" They smiled and the Prime Minister took the General's elbow. The rest of the party followed them out the door and up the marble staircase to the second floor where military police, in chromium-plated helmets and white gloves, snapped to attention while the party entered the conference room.

Cooper suspected it had originally been a ballroom. Red damask covered two of the walls, the others consisting of Gothic windows inset with marble tracery. A horseshoe-shaped black marble table had been set up in the centre of the room and the Prime Minister seated himself at the apex, flanked by General Mason and the other chiefs. Cooper's position was at one end, along with three Thai officers acting as a secretariat. General Kawee, standing in front of the Prime Minister, took the role of interpreter and general factotum.

Each of the Thai chiefs then rose and outlined the activities of his command. The presentation of the MAAG chiefs followed. Much discussion took place during which Cooper had an opportunity to study the Thai chiefs. Air Marshal Wicharn was inclined to play the bully and his attitude corroborated Prasert's remarks concerning the role of the Air Force in the delicately balanced power structure. The Admiral was definitely the junior member in all arguments although he exhibited a down-to-earth approach to problems and much

common sense. The Army chief, Field Marshal Chit, was the elder statesman of the group and, despite his fragile appearance, the other chiefs held him in great respect. It was apparent that they refrained from crossing swords with him on any particular point. Surprisingly enough, the Royal Thai Police Force was represented. Its burly chief, it developed, also commanded troops; not only in Bangkok but along the border as well.

The Prime Minister, Cooper concluded, for all his geniality, was definitely the strong man of the group and, even through the intricacies of translation, his skill in handling the prima donnas was apparent.

All MAAG suggestions were approved "in principle" for further study. Finally, General Mason rose and spoke on the need for joint training and the establishment of an air-ground school to teach principles of liaison between the Army and the Air Force. When the General had finished, the commanders launched into a spirited debate, and Cooper sat in frustration, regretting his ignorance of Thai.

The Prime Minister raised his hand and spoke. The idea, he announced, was approved. The lack of joint training had been under consideration for some time and all the chiefs recognised the need. An air-ground school would be established. MAAG would be informed when a joint manoeuvre could be scheduled.

Cooper saw the MAAG chiefs relax at the statement. Colonel White's face however, remained impassive.

The Prime Minister, after glancing at his watch, requested that charts and maps be brought in and he then presented the overall defence plan for the kingdom. General Mason pointed out several areas which, in his estimation, required further study. It was agreed that conferences would be held to go over these particular items.

When the party arrived back at MAAG, Cooper realised he had almost fifty pages of notes. He estimated it would be a two-day job to write them up and he busied himself

organising the project while Miss Patterson sat at her desk with the ever present Coke bottle, idly leafing through the "Diplomatic List." Looking over his notes, Cooper found he needed confirmation of some figures. "Miss Patterson," he said, "would you mind calling Captain Sawat for me?"

In a few moments she announced that he was on the phone. "Sawat," he said, "will you please skip up here and check some figures for me? I don't think that . . ."

A voice came back over the phone. "Captain, this is Colonel Suwan. Did you want to talk with me?"

"I'm sorry. I've got the wrong number, Colonel," he said and hung up, embarrassed to realise that he had been talking to one of the members of the Thai Army staff. "Miss Patterson!" he said in exasperation. "I asked you to get Sawat, not Suwan!"

"Sawat?"

"Captain Sawat. Who is sitting at his desk downstairs in the liaison office. The General's new aide. You called Colonel Suwan of the Joint Staff!"

Her voice was icy. "I didn't know that Sawat was the new aide . . ."

"Miss Patterson, I introduced him to you last week. He's been up here every day!"

"It wasn't explained to me that he would be working here . . ."

"I don't want to make an issue of this," and then he caught himself. "Just call him up here," he said, lowering his voice.

She rose and came over to his desk. "Captain," she said, "I realise I don't measure up to your standards as a stenographer. But I consider myself on an officer level and I think I should be treated accordingly."

He laid down his notes. "Miss Patterson," he began in a slow, even voice. "I believe you are a CS-4, which is the equivalent of a corporal. Or maybe it's a sergeant. At any event, it's a hell of a long way from an officer."

Her face froze and she swung around. After calling the Captain, she padded off downstairs. Gone for a good cry, he thought, picking up his notes.

At lunch time, he went down to the snack bar, which now served hamburgers and hot dogs. Major Mannon was standing at the counter. "Be my guest," he said. "I'm leaving in a couple of days for up-country." At a table they discussed the up-country assignment. "By the way," said Mannon, "your friend Patterson came down to see me this morning."

"What's she want now, an assistant?"

"Not quite. She was all shaken up. She said, 'Captain Cooper, in a fit of anger, said I ranked the same as a corporal. Is that true?' So I said to her, 'Why don't you ask him when he isn't in a fit of anger?' and she said, 'I have never known him to be otherwise!'"

They laughed and Mannon added, "You won't have to worry much longer. One of my last acts as Adjutant will be to put in for a replacement. Miss Patterson will work strictly for Colonel White pretty soon."

"Good," said Cooper. "They deserve each other!"

That evening, Cooper was getting into his car when Miss Patterson appeared in the car-park. "Could you possibly drop me off at the Thai Silk Shop on your way home, Captain?" she asked sweetly.

"Hop in," said Cooper. "I don't have a chauffeur tonight so you'll have to put up with my driving."

As the car turned out of the gate she said, "I've been wanting to talk with you. I'm sorry about today. It's just that I really didn't know Sawat was the new aide . . ."

"That's all right. I guess I was a bit hasty myself," said Cooper. "Too damned much work on that conference."

"I'm terrible at shorthand," she continued. "Otherwise I could do some of the typing for you."

"That's okay," laughed Cooper. "Nobody else can read it anyhow, including old man Gregg."

The drove in silence for a while through the New Road

traffic. "Did you enjoy that weekend at Bang San?" she asked.

"Very much." He was trying to figure out the best way to bring up the subject of the Marine.

"It turned out to be a bore for me," she said. "I hate kids."

He glanced at her with surprise. "Then why go to Bang San with that private?"

She turned to him with slightly myopic eyes. "I didn't know that anyone else liked to go to the beach."

"Lots of people like Bang San," he replied.

"Then why don't you ever ask me to go with you?"

He glanced at her with surprise. "I didn't know . . ." he began.

"Well, you know now," she interjected. "I like the beach very much. There we were, you with some Thai and me with that kid, both of us wasting a beautiful weekend!"

He was at a loss for an answer. "I didn't realise . . ."

She laughed. "You're really too much!" Then, after a pause, "Look, just call me Peggy. Even if you don't want to at headquarters."

"All right, Peggy," he said, glad to change the subject.

"That's better. And I'll call you Jim!" she said gaily, failing to see that he winced. "Maybe you can answer a question that's been bothering me," she continued. "Why didn't you rescue me from that kid?"

Cooper was annoyed with himself at being caught in such a trap, and wished he could stop the car and throw her out. "I didn't realise you wanted rescuing . . .," he said lamely.

"You must have thought *something*. You were interested enough to check on whether or not I was staying with him all night . . ."

He was dumbfounded. "What?"

She laughed. "Oh, I find out these things, you know . . ."

He flushed with embarrassment.

"You should have carried me away! Certainly a captain isn't put off by some private, even if he is a Marine! Besides,"

she continued with a teasing laugh, "it wouldn't have been hard. As it turned out, he was pretty timid!"

Cooper felt the conversation had taken on aspects of lunacy. He was supposed to be lecturing her about her wicked ways! With relief he saw they were approaching the Thai Silk Shop. "Here's the silk shop," he said, preparing to turn off the road.

"Oh, I'm not in the mood for buying silk," she said, lightly. "Let's just have a drink somewhere."

Cooper was furious. So it had all been a trick. He was about to announce that he had an engagement when she broke in, "You can buy me a drink at your hotel." She glanced at his face and added, "Don't worry, I only want one and then I'll call a cab and leave. Or maybe I'll find me a handsome samlor driver to pedal me home."

He swung the car back into traffic.

"Look," she continued, "I'm not trying to horn in on your life, Jim. It's just that Bangkok is pretty boring if you're not the sightseeing type. Here we are, you and I, two single Americans in this crazy place. You're no State-Department type cruising the samlor boys in Lumpini Park and I'm no cast-iron virgin washing out nylons in the can and reading myself to sleep with the book of the month. It's that simple."

He looked at her plump face and round eyes. Her sudden honesty surprised him. For the moment, he almost liked her.

"I'm a lousy stenographer," she continued, warmed by his glance. "And I know it. I'll admit I ran to Colonel White for protection when you first came because I was desperate. But now I've got to know you and the General better and I'm beginning to like the place. Except for Colonel White."

"Why him?"

"You'd better clue the General in on him," she said. "I don't know for sure, but he's playing some kind of footsie with the Thais. Don't ask me how I know because I don't. But so help me, he is."

They had arrived at the hotel and Cooper parked the car. They walked into the cocktail lounge for a drink.

"Here's how," she said, her eyes fixed on him over the top of her martini. He smiled and raised his own glass without comment. She sipped the drink, still looking at him. "Do you know what I think?" she said, finally.

"No, what?" he asked, hoping that he wouldn't be late meeting Tongchai.

"I think you've got someone else."

He was silent.

"You have, haven't you?"

He nodded.

"A Thai?"

"Yes," he said, hoping she would drop the subject.

"The girl you were dancing with at the Chez Eve a couple of weeks ago?"

He looked up at her in surprise.

"Oh, I saw you there," she said. "You didn't see me, though. You couldn't see anybody else but her. I even spoke to you but you didn't hear me."

He couldn't believe his ears. "I'm sorry about that."

"You needn't be. You were obviously having a ball. In fact, you ignored a lot of other people, too."

"It was pretty dark . . ."

"Not *that* dark! They all saw you. I suppose you don't remember Ambassador Murphy speaking to you, either."

"Ambassador Murphy!"

"'Mad Mike' himself. You were waltzing. And holding her so tight neither of you could possibly have been breathing."

"Good God!"

She put down her glass. "You're in love with that girl, aren't you?"

"I'd just as soon not talk about it."

"But you are. Now look, forget everything I've said. I'm just a little envious, that's all. You see, I had you staked out for myself from the first minute you walked into that headquarters. I figured that without any competition I had plenty

of time. I hadn't figured on the Thais. I thought you were just another officer who was only interested in his precious career. I would never have hurt that in a thousand years. You would have been safe with me."

"I don't know what you mean."

"Listen, Jim," and she leaned forward. "It's none of my business but I've been working for the Army for a long time and I've seen this happen before. The Thai girl isn't going to help you one bit."

He made a gesture of annoyance but she kept on. "I know," she said, "they call me one-drink Peggy and I guess that's right, but I want to get this out of my system. The military call what you're doing 'going native' and they consider it on a par with selling military secrets to the enemy or telling a Thai soldier to get the hell on the ball."

"Wait a minute, Peggy," he said. "I do appreciate your advice. And I know you mean well. But after all, this is personal and . . ."

"Of course it is, Jim," she interrupted. "So don't pay any attention to what I've said. In fact, crazy as it seems, I hope you won't, if you really love her. But remember, you're not only walking on thin ice—you're the first man since Christ to walk on *water*!"

They both smiled and she finished her drink.

"I've got to go now," she said and he started to rise. "Don't get up," she said. "We made a bargain. One drink and I go. I can find my way home. But watch yourself in the clinches. And there'll be a lot of them!"

"I'll drive you home, Peggy," he said, looking at his watch.

"All the way back there? Don't be silly. Who knows, maybe I'll find *me* a Thai, too."

They laughed and she rose to leave. "And if I don't," she added, over her shoulders, "I've always got a few nylons to wash out . . ."

Major Francis X. Mannon sat up in the front seat with the Thai driver as the station wagon jolted down the bumpy road towards Lampang, having, for the previous six hours, traversed the vast stretches of rice-paddy country north of Bangkok.

Far off he could see the cluster of greyish-brown wooden buildings that made up the town, and beyond that a series of hills. Mannon knew that the Parachute School was located beyond the town and after the long hours of driving he was anxious to reach it. It was nearing noon and he knew the driver must be as hungry as he was.

His face was covered with a fine layer of red dust that made his eyes smart. His collar was wilted and he knew there was a ring of dirt around his neck. He wished he didn't have to report to the new commander in such a state. Reaching down with a rag he flicked the dust from his highly polished boots.

He was reviewing, in his mind, the instructions he had received from Colonel Hawley. At the time, he had realised that they were somewhat insubstantial. He was to contact the commander of the post, Colonel Thom, and meet the other MAAG representative, a Sergeant Kelly, who had been stationed up there several months. He would live in facilities furnished by the Thais and would take over the supervision of the Parachute School and also a company of ranger troops.

Meals would be furnished by the Thais and he would have the services of a cook and orderly. Once a week the courier plane would land at the air strip to deliver mail, pick up messages and the weekly reports. Since the telephone service was erratic, he would use it only when absolutely necessary. His main contact would be by MAAG radio net, which would have to be established immediately.

"Lampang," announced the driver as they crossed over a muddy klong and rolled down the main street. Lampang was

a typical Thai country town; unpainted wooden buildings on both sides of the street, a ramshackle schoolhouse, and a tiny local cinema showing *The Guns of Laramie* with John Wayne. The inevitable loud speaker facing the main street was blaring forth high, atonal Thai music in the bright, dusty sunshine.

The vehicle continued through the town towards the camp and Mannon's thoughts drifted back to his interview with General Mason. The General had pointed out to him that although it was desirable that he "get along" with the Thais, he also had a responsibility to the United States Army. If he saw anything in the way of training or use of equipment which was, in his estimation, actually dangerous or harmful, he was to discuss it first with Colonel Thom and then, if necessary, bring the matter directly to the attention of Colonel Hawley. He was cautioned by the General that it would be wise to spend his first few weeks getting used to Thai customs and operating procedures before plunging into any big programme of changes.

The General had also explained to him that he was to keep aloof from problems of discipline or Thai Army customs, especially those involving relationships between officers and enlisted men.

Mannon had liked General Mason's brusque, matter-of-fact approach; a welcome change after Colonel White's smiling insinuations about understanding the Thais and the vague suggestion that personal relationships were more important than military ones. He also appreciated the General's final admonition: "I don't want reports that say 'Advisory activities as usual.' I want to know *what* problems came up, *what* you advised them to do about them, and whether or not your suggestions were carried out. Don't be afraid to be verbose. I want to know all about what goes on up there."

Through the windscreen he could see, against the foothills, a long white concrete building which he took to be the camp

headquarters. His trained eye noted that the general area was ideal for jumping, even though it lacked the huge ploughed drop zones of Fort Bragg.

The sun was blistering and the hot wind accentuated the general stickiness as the vehicle pulled up before the concrete building with the wide porch and open windows. Several Thai soldiers standing around the steps quickly leaped to attention when Mannon dismounted. He smiled to himself at the sight of their proud bearing and instant response. Evidently paratroopers were the same all over the world.

Inside the building, he was directed to the office of the adjutant Major Siri, a very light-complexioned Thai, rotund and jolly, who greeted him warmly and took him into the office of Colonel Thom. The short, heavy-set commander rose from his desk and extended his hand with a genial smile. He could not speak English but through Siri's interpretation expressed pleasure in seeing the newly arrived American. He was pleased with the equipment already received and with Sergeant Kelly, who had been very helpful. Major Siri would see that he was taken care of, and Colonel Thom himself would be available any time to talk with him.

Back in the main office, Mannon met Sergeant Kelly and liked his smart appearance, the well-shined boots and general air of efficiency.

He and the Sergeant accompanied Major Siri to a small wooden Thai house, perched on six-foot piles not far from the main building. Major Siri explained that it had been the Commandant's house before he married, and later it had been an office. Climbing up the wooden stairs, they found the house had a wide front porch, a living room and two bedrooms. A passageway between the bedrooms led to a little room at the back which was used as a kitchen. Siri had equipped it with a charcoal stove and an electric refrigerator. Downstairs, under the house, a newly constructed wooden partition enclosed a shower area, complete with the inevitable Shanghai jar.

Major Siri apologised for the furnishings. They consisted of a settee and several chairs, a desk and coffee table in the living room, and springless Thai beds in each bedroom.

Mannon instructed his driver to bring up his gear. The driver came up the stairs, accompanied by a husky young Thai corporal.

"This man will be your orderly, Major," said Siri. "His name is Corporal Gony."

Gony saluted and then took Mannon's proffered hand. "You're a husky lad," said Mannon. "Are you one of the company athletes?"

The Thai smiled, in confusion, and after it had been explained to him, he answered, "Yes, sah. I want be prize-fighter. Have already fight twice in Radjdamneron Stadium."

"You are a Siamese fighter? With the feet?"

Gony smiled and nodded his head.

"Good," said Mannon. "Maybe someday you can teach me."

Mannon dismissed the Sergeant and he and Major Siri sat down and lit cigarettes.

"I like the set-up," said Mannon. "Now tell me something. Does Colonel Thom prefer that all MAAG people stay together? Should Sergeant Kelly live here too?"

Siri shrugged. "It is as you like, Major."

"Come on, Siri. It doesn't make any difference to me. What would be easier for the command?"

"Well," said Siri, "there would be many benefits if all MAAG people were in the same place . . . like cooking food, and so on . . ."

"Thanks, Siri. That's my idea too. I'll have the Sergeant move in here with me. He can have the other bedroom."

Siri smiled. "Thank you, Major. The same orderly can work for both of you and I think you would prefer to eat here. We have no officers' mess the way you have in the States." He stood up to go. "Anything we have forgot, like light bulbs and curtains and so on, please have your Sergeant

give a list to my Sergeant Major. We want you to be satisfied. We know it is not very good but we will do our best."

When Siri had left, Mannon finished his cigarette and drew in a deep breath of the warm air that smelled of some exotic vegetation. It reminded him, somehow, of Colorado in August. He was going to like this assignment.

The next morning, after meeting the officers at headquarters, Mannon and the Sergeant toured the post. They visited the parachute-packing shed, empty now since the current class had just started their four-week training course. The long, narrow packing tables were spotless and the chutes properly stored and marked. Later, Mannon and Kelly watched the class in training. The sixty soldiers did Fort Benning callisthenics and then took off in double-time down dusty lanes in T shirts and shorts.

They visited the thirty-four-foot training tower where the men would practice jumping. Mannon went out to the air strip and inspected the Dakotas. He had forgotten that the C-47 planes were so small. It was hard to realise that armadas of these aircraft had carried paratroopers into combat in Sicily, Normandy and Holland.

When the two Americans returned to Mannon's quarters, they found that Gony had been busy. Floors were damp from mopping and a bowl of flowers adorned the coffee table. Mannon's uniforms had been hung on an improvised rack. His toilet articles were downstairs in the shower stall. His books were neatly stacked on the floor and Gony assured him that "Tomorra I make place for books."

The cook reported in for duty. He was a short, bow-legged sergeant of Chinese ancestry. He had a rather formidable expression belied by his genial manner when he spoke. "Looks like Peter Lorre with a hangover," said Sergeant Kelly after he had disappeared in the kitchen and they could hear him banging pots and pans as he rearranged the entire kitchen.

Mannon told Sergeant Kelly that he wanted him to move

into the house. Accordingly, that evening, Sergeant Kelly, assisted by Gony, moved his belongings into the other bedroom. Along with his clothing, the Sergeant arrived with his stock of Campbell's soup, peanut butter, biscuits, tinned sardines. "Sometimes the Thai rations get kinda weird," he explained.

"Look, Sergeant," said Mannon, after the Sergeant's gear had been stowed away. "You and I will be living together. It will be a little difficult at first, until both of us get used to the situation. First, I want you to type up a schedule and post it in the kitchen, showing our reveille time, the hours for meals, for reporting to work, and so on, so that the cook and Gony will know what's going on.

"Now, what you do in your off-time is your own business. I'm not interested and I don't intend to play governess. Except, of course, we can't have women in here, nor can drinking get out of hand. If you want to go out at night, feel free to do so. Do whatever you like, and I will do the same. But as far as this house goes, it will operate like any Bachelor Officers' Quarters."

"I understand," said the Sergeant. "Let me say now, sir, that I'm engaged to be married when I get back home so I don't run around with Thai women. I've been to the Thai NCO Club but there isn't anything there for me. I go to the cinema once in a while down in Lampang. And I read a lot." He hesitated a moment. "There is just one thing . . . if it's all right with you . . ."

"What's that?"

"I've got a set of barbells." The Sergeant looked at him for a moment.

"Are you a weightlifter?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, what's the problem? Go get them. I suppose the best spot would be under the house. You could set up a rack and make a training area down there. I think it's a damned good idea."

"Thanks, sir," said Kelly, obviously relieved. "Some people think weightlifting is kind of silly . . ."

"Well, I don't."

The schedule was typed that night and nailed on the wall. The cook was appraised of mealtimes. He also inventoried the Sergeant's supplementary rations so they could be reordered from Bangkok from time to time.

Neither Mannon nor Kelly knew that on the following day, during an inspection tour, Colonel Thom visited the house. Intrigued by the sight of the schedule, he had Major Siri translate it for him in its entirety.

During the first week of the Parachute School training cycle, either the Sergeant or Mannon was present each morning when the class started the early morning run and gradually the Thais became used to having one of the Americans double-time along with them. This was a new departure. No Thai officer had ever been present at that hour.

Major Mannon made copious notes of his daily observances of training, both of the parachutists and the ranger company, but said very little. He also watched Sergeant Kelly and was gratified to see that he combined just the right amount of easygoing banter, which the Thais appreciated, with a solid efficiency they respected.

Mannon found himself involved in two projects. The first concerned language. It seemed to him that he and Sergeant Kelly could do a better job if they knew a little Thai. He typed up a list of basic Thai expressions and military terms. The list was hung up in the shower with another copy alongside the Sergeant's barbells, so the phrases could be memorised as they went about their daily pursuits. The other project involved code. Mannon had several books on codes. One evening he and Sergeant Kelly worked out a basic Venturi-type code, utilising the alphabet and the numbers one to ten, which could be used for notes and messages and was virtually

unbreakable unless one knew the key, which consisted of a single predetermined sentence such as "Mary had a little lamb." In this way, Mannon could leave messages of instruction for Kelly openly at headquarters and no one was able to read them except the Sergeant. They came in handy in arranging for things like surprise inspections.

One afternoon Gony said, "Sah, you have riding shoes for horse in cupboard. You like ride horses?"

Mannon admitted that he liked riding and had hoped to find horses at the post. According to Gony, the cavalry unit in Bangkok had a remount station not too far from Lampang. That started the ball rolling and in a few days Major Siri mentioned that Colonel Thom, hearing that Mannon liked to ride, had arranged for a horse to be sent over. "The Colonel does not ride himself," said Siri, "but he is happy to know we have at least one cavalryman on the post."

The horse appeared and was promptly stabled in an improvised stall under the house. Gony was given the additional duty of groom. Equipping himself with maps of the area, Mannon spent several afternoons a week and sometimes all of Sunday riding over the hills in search of training areas for the rangers.

Major Mannon found he had many more ideas than he could put into effect immediately. It occurred to him that the best thing would be to keep a kind of diary where he could record his impressions and thoughts for future use. This also helped to maintain that thin, invisible line he felt necessary to keep between himself and Sergeant Kelly. He could see unhappy consequences if both of them were to let down the bars and sit around the table, drinking and arguing about points of training.

He began his diary with comments on the daily state of training but gradually his evening sessions at the typewriter became longer as he included more and more general

impressions. It sometimes provided an outlet for the hostilities which rose during the day.

He recorded a frustrating event that took place several weeks after his arrival. He was riding to the air strip with one of the captains, when he noticed that the jeep was moving sluggishly. Suddenly there was a heavy clanking sound and the driver, after pushing the accelerator several times, gave up and the vehicle ground to a slow and ominous halt.

The driver dismounted and lifted the bonnet. The smell of overheated metal was apparent and Major Mannon glanced back at the Captain, still sitting in the rear seat. Jumping out, Mannon checked with the driver, who was aimlessly poking at the engine. Smoke was rising from the block. "What's wrong?" he asked, using his limited Thai vocabulary, but the driver smiled a worried smile and shrugged. Checking the oil gauge, Mannon found that the motor was without oil. "Did you check the motor this morning?" he asked the driver. There was no answer.

"You have motor stables today?" Again the driver shrugged.

"Yesterday?" There was still no answer.

"Maybe there's a leak," said Mannon and he crawled under the vehicle to check but there was no indication of any leak in the oil pan. He got up and brushed himself off. The Thai Captain was still sitting in the back seat. Mannon was annoyed. "Did you know that the driver has been operating this jeep without oil?" he asked the Captain.

The Captain shook his head. "Motor Pool supposed to check. Maybe jeep is no good."

Mannon exploded. "There's nothing wrong with the jeep! It's just plain goddamned negligence! Now it's burned up because of a couple of quarts of oil. Jesus Christ!"

The Captain didn't understand what was said but he seemed to get the point. Dismounting, he told the driver to get some transportation from the air strip and turned back to the Major. "Driver bring back jeep from airplane strip."

"Hell, we could walk there in the time it will take him . . ." and then he stopped, remembering that he was losing face. He stood a few more moments letting his anger subside.

"Maybe we will not be so late at the airfield," said the Captain with a tentative smile. "I am sorry about jeep. I talk with motor pool . . ."

Mannon realised he would gain nothing by continuing the harangue. "Let's wait in the shade," was his only comment.

Back at the office, Major Mannon pulled the Sergeant aside. "The schedule calls for us to inspect the motor stables twice a week. Have you looked them over this week yet?"

"Day before yesterday," said the Sergeant. "And I know what you're going to say."

"Were the drivers checking the vehicles for oil and water before they left the motor pool?"

"Yes, sir. But the catch is that only half the vehicles were there. The motor pool is drawing up a list of every MAAG vehicle on the post. Then I can keep track of whether or not they're getting maintenance and whether the records are correct."

"What do you mean 'records are correct'?"

The Sergeant looked at him for a moment. "Major, I suspect that these men are not above checking off maintenance that hasn't been performed. But I'll find out. We do it ourselves, once in a while, you know. The big problem is that every driver is an orderly too. And when they go out in the field, the orderly has to make breakfast and heat up shaving water for the officer. Something has to give . . ."

"All right. Keep after it. I'll talk with Thom after you get the figures."

That night, Mannon made an entry in his journal :

The Thai has never had to work very hard in the Army. In joining it he became one of the upholders of the realm with the prospect of a long, somewhat lazy life. Free bus

trips, many holidays. If he is lucky, a chance to be a driver-orderly for an officer.

Then came MAAG with a lot of new ideas about maintaining vehicles. Which means things like checking vehicles every morning before they start. And this is in conflict with his duties as orderly. But if he doesn't cook rice and heat shaving water, the officer will be mad. That means he won't get extra time off, maybe he won't even get his full pay. So naturally he lets the vehicle go without checking it.

The driver himself knows little more than how to drive, or if he's had any mechanical training he's lazy and forgets about it. He never drives the way Americans do—with one eye on the gauges—he just keeps one foot on the gas. And the officer himself doesn't know enough about a vehicle to handle it intelligently. So the jeep runs until it breaks down, because of something as fundamental as lack of oil or even water. No spare tyre is ever fixed, it is just put back on the vehicle, etc.

The easiest thing for them to do is to complain that MAAG doesn't give them satisfactory vehicles, and then sit in the sun and wait . . . for anything . . . or nothing.

Mannon pulled the sheet from the typewriter, inserted it into his journal and walked out in the living room to pour himself a drink. "Mai Ben Rai," he said to himself. "How I hate that goddamned expression!"

Cooper, in his room at the Chakri Hotel, was preparing to meet Tongchai and drive her to the Princess Rangsarit's palace where she would accept a book for the university library. Her father, who would ordinarily receive the gift in the name of the university, could not be present and had appointed her to act in his place. Cooper suspected that Tong-

chai had arranged the whole thing herself so that he could meet the Princess.

The shower, as usual, was not working, and Cooper sloshed water over himself from the Shanghai jar. He was thinking how lucky he was to be in Thailand and, above all, to know Tongchai. He accepted the fact that he had no real friends in MAAG except, possibly, Mannon and realised that this was nothing new. All his years in the Army had been spent in Bachelor Officers' Quarters and, under the near-monastic discipline, he had existed in a glowing world of his own—still the incurable romantic lying on Gramp's book-strewn floor, wanting to see, taste and feel what the world had to offer.

Lately, for the first time since his febrile year with Iris, he perceived how lonely he had been in the Army and wondered how he had existed without Tongchai and the little room down by the river.

Other than that one evening at the Chez Eve, they lived outside the military and government circles in Bangkok. Except for Prasert, no one knew how completely their lives had grown together. They went to the cinema, or the Silpakorn Theatre, took Sunday drives to the beach or visited the old capital of Ayuthia, each night climaxed by the aching intimacy of fulfilled love. Dressing before the mirror, Cooper smiled to himself at the thought of their stolen life in the middle of exotic Bangkok.

The afternoon traffic on New Road was at its noisiest as Cooper and Tongchai, in the Vauxhall, turned off and crossed a shaky wooden bridge over a wide klong and turned into what appeared to be a jungle.

"The Princess is very interesting," said Tongchai.

"Then why are you so nervous?" asked Cooper.

"Oh, she is royalty," Tongchai replied, smoothing her dress. "My father instructed me what to say when I accept the book."

"She spends a lot of time in cocktail lounges, doesn't she?"

asked Cooper. "In her younger days she must have been quite a dish . . ."

"She goes also to the horse races," said Tongchai, with a nervous laugh.

"What about the book. Is it a masterpiece of some kind?"

Tongchai shrugged. "I have not read it since school. It was written by King Rama the Sixth. He was a famous poet also."

"Rama, the Sixth? He built Government House, didn't he? For a boy friend? He must have been . . . what is the word . . . katoi?"

"Jimmy!" she said in a shocked voice and she blushed. "Never must you say that word. You do not understand it. It is very bad! Please . . ."

"All right, Tongchai. I'm sorry . . ."

The gravelled drive circled a miniature park, now untended. Through tattered leaves of banana and mango trees they caught a glimpse of a miniature Sans Souci, one story high, with a mansard roof studded with wreathed medallions. French windows extended along the ground floor. The tropical sun had bleached out the yellow paint on the walls and torrential rains had streaked them with black mould.

An old Thai servant, waiting at the portico, conducted them through a musty hallway to a small paved terrace ringed by a stone balustrade on which were poised several cast-iron nymphs. Wicker chairs with faded chintz cushions had been drawn up around a coffee table. There was an air of remoteness about the sun-dappled terrace and through an open door Cooper saw dark-red walls, heavy Empire furniture and the dull gleam of ormolu.

A regal figure presently appeared in the doorway. Almost ninety years old, the Princess stood leaning on a cane with a silver knob. Cooper recognised the mass of red hair, the heavily lidded eyes and the face which still bore traces of youthful beauty.

She smiled and extended a heavily veined hand with a huge diamond ring. Touching her fingers together, Tongchai curt-

sied deeply and, taking the hand of the Princess, said, "Suwadi, Your Highness. May I present Captain Cooper, of the American Advisory Group."

"Good afternoon," said the Princess and motioned them towards the circle of chairs. "Please sit down. I am very glad you could come here today. How is your father, Nai Thanom?"

"He is not in the city today, Your Highness," replied Tongchai. "It was kind of you to permit me to come in his place."

The Princess snapped her fingers and an elderly Thai butler appeared with a silver tray containing three glasses of wine. Approaching the Princess, he dropped on one knee as she lifted a glass from the tray. He repeated the gesture for Tongchai and Cooper and then withdrew.

While they sipped the wine, the Princess sat studying Tongchai and Cooper. "It is not often I meet people of your age nowadays," she said pleasantly, "and it is a welcome change." Turning to Cooper she added, "I think I met you . . . at the Oriental Hotel . . . on the front steps. Did you enjoy yourself that evening?"

He nodded, amazed that she should remember so slight an encounter. "Very much, Your Highness," he said.

"I no longer meet so many handsome young men that I can afford to forget one of them," she smiled. "I understand you have been in Thailand only a short time. Have you found it to be a pleasant place?"

"Very much, Your Highness. It is a fascinating country," and he glanced at Tongchai who smiled back at him.

The Princess sat quietly studying both of them for a moment. "And have you found our young ladies to be . . . pleasurable company?"

Cooper, to his surprise, found himself blushing. The old lady, in a sudden gesture, thumped her cane on the pavement and chuckled. Cooper saw a hint of licentiousness in her face. "Young man, you do know what I am talking about. And you are charming enough to blush!" She picked up her drink,

suddenly grave. "Please excuse me, Captain," she said with a rueful look. "I do not mean to embarrass you. When one is . . . pardon me one last vanity . . . mature, it is easy to forget that the real conservatives are the young!"

She turned to Tongchai. "I understand, my dear young lady, that you are connected with the Ministry of the Interior." She studied her silently for a moment. "How is Prince Viwat?"

"Prince Viwat?" asked Tongchai. "I'm afraid I don't know . . . know who he is . . ."

"Oh, my dear, excuse me," said the Princess. "I meant his son . . . no . . . grandson. Heavens! I mean Phra Llonk-kram . . ."

Tongchai smiled. "I am afraid, Your Highness, that I do not know him that well. I believe, however, he is in good health."

Cooper could see that Tongchai was flattered that she should be asked about the health of the Minister of the Interior himself.

"My immediate superior," she added, "is General Kawee."

"Kawee," said the Princess slowly. "I do not believe I am familiar with the name." There was something in the tone of her voice which indicated that she would never know General Kawee even if he were the Prime Minister.

After a few moments the Princess said, "And now, enough of this vermouth. Would you be so kind, Captain, as to look under the coffee table. There you will find something more to your taste."

Cooper leaned over and was surprised to see a collection of liquors on the lower shelf. Again the Princess snapped her fingers and the butler appeared with ice, glasses and a carafe of water.

"Please pour something you like," she continued. "Perhaps I might take a glass of Kümmel."

Cooper selected the bottles and the butler proceeded to mix the drinks. The Princess turned to Tongchai. "I have asked

you to come here today so that I might give you my copy of *Romance of the Rose* for the university library. I realise, of course, that its value as a bibelot probably outweighs any merit it may have as a work of serious literature. It does have charm, though. You see, I remember the night it was first performed . . . that was . . . heavens, forty years ago !”

She turned to Cooper. “If you are interested in my country, some day you will read about King Rama, one of the few kings in history who was also a poet. I will not say philosopher or thinker because he was none of these things. He was simply a poet, on whom the gods doubled their vengeance by giving him a crown as well. So you must be kind to his memory.”

“I should think that a poet who is also a king would be the happiest of people,” said Cooper.

The old Princess studied the glass in her spidery fingers, and shook her head. “Because men write happy verses does not necessarily mean they are themselves happy. In fact, it is more likely to be the opposite and only on paper do they achieve the happiness their subjects take for granted.

“You see,” she continued, “King Rama was the most unfortunate of men. He spent his life searching for his own kind of love and understanding. Being a king, he attempted to create an entire world of his own. Of course he failed.” Her eyes closed and she leaned back in her chair. “I have seen so many worlds fail . . .”

“Your Highness,” said Cooper, “I understand that you knew Czar Nicholas of Russia . . .”

The Princess opened her eyes. “Oh, yes,” she said. “The Czar was a close friend of Prince Rangsarit and a relative of mine. When we were married he was kind enough to loan us his private train that took us to St. Petersburg for our honeymoon. We spent it in the Winter Palace . . .”

“Then,” said Cooper, “you must have known what Russian society was like when it was at its height. You must have seen St. Petersburg when it was a fabulous city.”

The Princess smiled. “You are an anachronism, Captain.”

She twisted the huge ring around a thin finger. "No one now remembers those days. Yes," she continued, half to herself, "the Nevsky Prospekt was the most beautiful street and St. Petersburg the loveliest city on earth."

"Some day I want to see those things," said Cooper. "The Hermitage . . . St. Isaacs . . ."

"Oh, yes," she said with a touch of weariness. "They are still there. But the sad part is, Captain, that never for a single moment can anyone catch even a glimpse of that lost world. Because it had nothing to do with chandeliers and draperies . . ."

She paused and sipped her drink. "You must forgive me, both of you, for inflicting my memories on you."

She studied them from under her heavy eyelids. "It doesn't take a revolution to create a world," she said, slowly. "Sometimes a man and woman, in a single moment, can create a world more wonderful than . . . St. Petersburg." There was something disconcerting about her fixed look and Cooper reached over and took Tongchai's hand in his. The Princess smiled at the gesture, and struck her cane on the pavement as though in confirmation of some thought. "The two of you . . . are you in love with each other?"

Tongchai nodded her head. "Very much," said Cooper.

The old woman studied them for a moment. "My dear children," she said, stirring a little in her chair. "I do not pretend to know your world and yet I cannot believe it is so very different from the one I knew when I was young. Love is the most precious thing in the world. Do not throw it away needlessly or through fear. Both of you come from opposite ends of the earth, but believe me when I tell you that love can bridge all things."

Cooper and Tongchai looked at each other, smiling, as she continued. "But love can be a terrible thing, too. Like . . . a tidal wave . . . it breaks down all the barriers . . ."

"I love Tongchai," said Cooper vehemently, "and barriers don't count."

The Princess smiled wearily. "Barriers are not entirely worthless, Captain," she said, gently. "They are built of wisdom and experience. But you may be right. Sometimes they do *not* count. The difficult thing is to know when."

"Our generation doesn't believe much in barriers . . ." began Cooper, but the Princess laughed softly and interrupted him. "Your generation, my dear young man, is not so different from all the others in that respect. Nowadays one talks of psychoanalysis and atomic science and new theories of government and art but you must remember that all of these things were discovered by *my* generation—by Dr. Einstein and Freud, and Mr. Lenin and Picasso and Joyce. They were the real innovators. People thought that a completely new world was in the making. But I have found that it is not so very different from the old one. There are still such things as honesty, and faith, and abiding love . . ."

Cooper smiled and subsided and the old lady turned to Tongchai. "Remember, my dear," she said, "your great, great grandmother was a Princess of the Blood. That knowledge can serve you as a talisman, should you ever need it. And if your young man wishes to take you away from Thailand, go with him. It is a terrible thing for me to say, but I am happy that I shall not live long enough to see Siam become a regimented abattoir of dreams . . ."

"Your Highness!" exclaimed Cooper, "that's why we are here . . . to prevent that . . ."

The Princess nodded. "I know. And your presence is appreciated. But Thailand is a rich little country standing in the way of a great power. It is possible that some day we may become the Armageddon . . ."

Catching the look on Cooper's face she smiled, a little sadly. "It is not always wrong to be cynical, Captain," and she placed her empty glass on the coffee table. "It appears to me," she continued, "that both of you have chosen well. And now," she clapped her hands, "let me release you from my maunderings."

The butler appeared in the doorway. "Please bring me the book on the library desk," she said. In a moment he reappeared carrying a red leather volume tooled in gold. She handed the book to Tongchai, who received it and bowed in thanks.

"I would like to think," said the old lady, "that perhaps someday a person like Captain Cooper may find it in the library . . . and possibly may even read it."

They rose and again Tongchai curtsied, after which they withdrew, leaving the Princess sitting in her chair, one hand raised in a farewell gesture.

The car rolled along the driveway towards the gate and Cooper felt as though he were emerging from an unreal world. There had been something unbelievable about the afternoon . . . the crumbling palace, the fragile old lady with her talk of long-dead kings and poetry and love.

Crossing the wooden bridge, he turned the car into the blare of New Road traffic. Tongchai moved close beside him and put her arm through his. Somewhere a loudspeaker spewed forth a raucous song . . . "You Gotta See Mama Every Night or You Can't See Your Mama at All!"

15

After checking the incoming mail at the MAAG office, Cooper was disturbed. The minutes of the Council meeting had been submitted to Government House several days previously, but no reaction had been received. He was perturbed enough to ask the General what he should do about it. "Forget it, Jim," said Mason. "You did a good job. They'll send them back when they're ready. Why not ask Captain Sawat to look into the matter. Maybe he can do it unofficially."

A half-hour after Cooper had asked Sawat to find out about the minutes, the Thai aide came back. "General Kawee says that your record has been accepted."

"Accepted? They weren't sent to him for acceptance! Those are *our* minutes. General Kawee was supposed to compare them with the Thai notes and let us know if our version is correct."

Sawat was puzzled. "Your minutes are the official ones . . ."

"What about the three Thai officers who were making notes during the conference?"

Captain Sawat smiled. "Captain, the Thai officers cannot take shorthand. They summarised. You have a record of each word spoken. General Kawee has read them over and he thanks you for improving his grammar. Your notes are now the official ones."

Cooper smiled. "I'm flattered," he said, with relief. "I'll tell the Old Man about it."

"There is one more thing," said Sawat. "I would like to request a day off next week. I hope you like me well enough to let me go."

Cooper was taken back. "What do you mean 'like me well enough'? You're entitled to a day off and it doesn't matter whether I like you or not. What day do you want?"

Sawat told him and he consulted his chart. "Okay."

"I'm going to take the examination for Thai staff college."

"Good luck! Hope you make it."

"I won't pass. I've tried it before and I didn't pass then. It's very difficult."

"I don't understand. Didn't you study?"

"Oh, no. I can never study enough to pass the examination. It is too difficult. But the new commander likes me and he will fix it."

"I don't understand. You mean that if the Commandant is a friend of yours, you can get in anyhow?"

"Yes."

Sawat left and Cooper shook his head. Later on, when he told General Mason about the notes he also mentioned Captain Sawat and his imminent acceptance at the staff school

because he was a friend of the Commandant. It was the General's turn to shake his head.

Miss Patterson was waiting for Cooper's return with a paper in her hand. "I suppose this is what you've been waiting for," she explained as she laid the schedule for the General's up-country inspection on his desk.

"Thanks, Peggy," he said and, noticing that she was wearing stockings, added, "Nice nylons you're wearing today . . ."

"Thank *you*, sir," she replied with a mock curtsy. "I wash them out each night. In the can ! It's such mad fun !"

In checking over the schedule, Cooper considered what he might contribute to the success of the trip. He rummaged around in his desk and assembled the weekly reports from the up-country advisers. Going over them, he extracted notes of the problems they had reported—disputes on training procedures, non-delivery of equipment, late arrival of the MAAG plane, etc., making up a three-by-five card on each unit. When General Mason saw them he had one question. "What brought this about?"

"Sir," said Cooper, "if I were an up-country adviser and you came to inspect my unit and mentioned these things it would probably shake me up to realise that somebody at MAAG is actually reading and taking note of my weekly reports. I figured you could use these cards as reminders."

The General smiled and pocketed the cards.

The C-47 took off from Don Muang airfield with General Mason, Colonel Hawley, Cooper and Sawat. The first stop was scheduled for the northernmost unit, along the Mekong River. Several hours later the plane landed at a grassy air strip constructed during World War II. The overgrown wire matting served as a grazing area and buffalo had to be driven off the runway before the plane could land.

The local MAAG adviser was waiting for the plane with several jeeps to take the visitors on the three-mile trip to the Thai headquarters. Charts had been set up and a Thai major

was waiting to brief the party. This was followed by formal inspection of troops in ranks. After lunch, the General inspected the living quarters of the three MAAG personnel stationed with the company.

He found that they got back to Bangkok once a month for a weekend. Their local diversion was the civilian cinema. The only drawback to that was the fact that the theatre showed American films with dubbed-in Thai speech, so the plot became a guessing game.

Cooper noticed that although the quarters had been carefully policed up, there were numerous white rings on the top of the coffee table and comic books peeped out from behind the canned goods in the kitchen cabinet.

Seated in the living room, the General was informed that Thai troops along the border lived a relatively uneventful life. The soldiers, locally recruited, occasionally slipped off to help their parents during the harvest time. The biggest problem of the advisers was the constant efforts of the Thais to telescope two or even three training classes into one, to make up for their many holidays.

"How about the radio crystals that didn't arrive last month?" asked the General. Cooper recognised this as one of the items on the three-by-five cards. There was a moment of startled silence and the General turned to Hawley. "Do you recall whether or not they ever got them?" he asked blandly. Hawley, uncomfortable, shifted in his chair. "I don't believe I recall that item, sir." The General turned back to the MAAG Captain. "Well, sir," said the Captain, "after the report was sent off I found they had been shipped all right, but somebody in the supply room piled ammunition on top of the container and all the crystals were broken."

"What have you done about it?"

"We're going to reorder, sir," he said.

"What's holding you up?"

"Well, sir, the fact is the Thais at this post only use one crystal per set anyway . . ."

“Why only one?”

There was a silence and the Captain glanced helplessly at Colonel Hawley. “They don’t want their people communicating with the Communists across the border. It’s a rather ticklish situation . . .”

The General sat back and looked at Hawley. “Most interesting. Did you know about this, Hawley?”

The Colonel shook his head. “Have they been communicating?” he asked.

“No, sir,” said the Captain. “It’s just that they don’t want them to start.”

The General said, “Captain, this is the kind of thing we want to know about in Bangkok. You men up here are our eyes and ears.”

“Yes, sir,” said the Captain, eager to be off the hook. “Lots of things like that happen. I haven’t put them in the reports because, well, I didn’t know just how much of it . . .”

“Whatever you see or hear of interest,” said the General, “should be written up in your report. Don’t worry about format or anything else. Just label it . . . something you saw, heard or guessed.”

“Yes, sir,” said the relieved Captain. “I never realised before that Big Br . . . I mean, the headquarters, was watching us.”

The party was scheduled to spend the night at the post guest house. Before retiring, the General requested the MAAG Captain to get him a couple of jeeps, some field glasses, maps and a box of sandwiches for the next day. Early the following morning, dispensing with the services of the local MAAG advisers, the General and his party proceeded up to the border to visit the twin towns of Mong San and Mong Rai.

For a casual inspection trip, the General was surprisingly thorough. At Mong San they climbed up and down the river bank, surveyed Laos across the river through field glasses. Using Captain Sawat as an interpreter, the General talked with the local policemen in their little black-and-white sentry boxes along the road, asking them about their hours of duty,

their communication system and how many illegal border-crossers they had picked up.

The party ate lunch under a tamarind tree on the road to Mong Rai. At the town itself the General showed special interest in the ferry crossing into Laotian territory. On the way back to MAAG headquarters, they stopped at every bridge on the narrow dirt road. Cooper dismounted and checked the size and condition of the supports.

Dead tired, they finally arrived back at headquarters. The General had checked, in detail, the defence for that section of the Thai border, the plan for which he had seen back at Government House.

The party tumbled into their beds immediately after supper and slept until the early morning call for transportation back to the air strip.

The next stop was the unit at Xchiang. There, the jeep carrying the General from the air strip to the post developed a flat tyre en route. It turned out that the Thai driver could not change it because the spare was also flat. A check revealed that two of the six lug nuts on the wheel were missing and, after a frantic scramble, it was found that all the spares but one in the convoy of five vehicles were flat. When they finally got under way again, Colonel Hawley was livid with anger. The General asked the adviser captain about it.

"Well, sir," said the adviser with a deprecating smile, "these Thais are just getting into the mechanical age and it's a problem to keep up vehicles. The only thing they really know about them is that it takes petrol to make them go."

The General was not amused. "I don't recall, Captain, that you mentioned that in your reports," he replied.

There was silence.

"I do recall, however," continued the General (and Cooper recognised the reference from the three-by-five cards) that last month a requisition forwarded to Bangkok requested twenty new tyres. I am beginning to understand why. How long have you been here?"

"Almost a year, sir. I leave next month."

"During that time, how often have you inspected the motor stables?"

"Oh, once in a while. That's the Sergeant's job."

"How often does he inspect them?"

There was a pause. "A couple of times a week, I'd say."

"You would say? Does that mean you don't know?"

Colonel Hawley broke in. "Your weekly reports say motor stables are inspected daily. I take it that you don't actually know."

The conversation was mercifully cut short by the arrival of the vehicles at the headquarters, a shabby wooden building with a wide porch. In the centre of the veranda was a steel-mesh cage, inside which were several safes. The General was told that these safes, once each month, held the pay for the unit. The pay was personally disbursed by the Commander.

Sawat murmured in Cooper's ear, "You see now why it is necessary to be nice to the Commander. If you aren't, you will be hurting on pay day."

During the briefing, the General brought up the subject of the motor pool and the smiling Thai Commander told him that all the petrol, oil and tyres were locked up in the motor pool and he was the only man with a key. "Otherwise," said the interpreter, "it would all disappear on the black market."

During the inspection of the advisers' quarters, the General happened to notice a piece of paper tacked on the wall. He reached for it before the Sergeant could snatch it away; it had evidently been forgotten. A red-faced Captain stood by while the General read it and handed it, without comment, to Colonel Hawley. The Colonel read it through. "Who wrote this goddamned crap?" he asked. After a moment the Captain replied, "It wasn't supposed to be up there, sir. I did it just as a gag."

"I don't think it's a goddamned bit funny," said Hawley and he crumpled it up in his hand. He looked around and handed it to Cooper to dispose of. Later, Cooper took a look

at the crumpled paper. It was a poem, entitled "Upon the Receipt of DA Orders" and it read :

When this dizzy tour is done
And my homeward trip's begun
I'll laugh and laugh and laugh with fiendish glee.
I'll have left this crazy nation
And my old up-country station
For a life that's much more saner
In the old U.S. Armeec.

You can talk about per diem
And the sights, if you can see 'em,
But I'll take all of mine in New York town.
Playing footsie day by day
Ain't my way of earning hay.
Efficiency reports
Go down and down.

Now I've argued and cajoled
But was told I couldn't scold,
"Do the job but don't bust any heads."
I was scalded in the stew
Served up by MAAG HQ.
My advising now is done
From whorehouse beds.

While on my homeward cruise
I'll remember all the booze
The Co-op, Lido and the Hoi Chien Lao
And I won't feel bereaved
For Dick's and old Chez Eve
But howl, man,
I can hear 'em howling now.

Though I hear you start to snicker
Get your finger off the trigger
For what I've got to say is gospel true.

My first sight of CONUS
Will be my Thailand bonus
I won't be back again
And that's a clue.

In the plane, on the way to Lampang, Colonel Hawley was discussing the problem with the General. "As you can see, the business of advising up-country units isn't easy. I don't believe it's always understood back in Bangkok."

"What about the previous commander?" asked the General. "What steps did he take to tighten up the controls?"

"Colonel Carpenter came up here just once during his tour," said Hawley. "And his inspection was confined to briefings and luncheons."

The General was silent.

The last stop of the inspection trip was at the Parachute School and Ranger Training Station at Lampang. The General's party, coming off the plane, was met by Colonel Thom and Major Mannon, who took them to the large headquarters building for the briefing.

During the afternoon, the General and his party were taken to the drop zone to observe students of the Parachute School making their first jump. Major Mannon acted as jumpmaster in the plane and Cooper, sitting beside the General and Colonel Thom on the bleachers, watched the first planeload roar overhead and chutes blossom out in the sky.

Several of the jumpers drifted close to the stand. They hit the ground, tumbled, and, jumping up, ran around to collapse their billowing chutes. Unhooking themselves from their harness, they stood looking around for a moment, slapping the dust from their uniforms, and Cooper knew exactly how they felt. He remembered his first jump and the feeling of exaltation he had experienced when he stood up on the ground, with the wind ruffling his hair, to look around at the blue sky and the wide, sandy field. He had dared to stand in a plane door,

facing twelve hundred feet of empty space and, on command, leap into the roaring prop blast, staking his life on a bundle of folded silk and nylon cords.

Watching the jumpers assemble, he was overcome with a sharp sense of loneliness. Parachuting was, above all, an act of faith, not only in equipment but in his fellowmen. He envied the Major and his job. He knew that during the short ride in the plane, all eyes had been fixed on Mannon. The jumpmaster was the man who stood in the door, his face whipped out of shape by the blast, peering down to see the drop area; he was the man who gave the command, "Go!" and he was the one from whom they drew the inner strength to step for the first time into space.

When the troopers had assembled, the General and his party accompanied Colonel Thom, who walked over to congratulate them. Cooper knew then that nothing in Bangkok was quite as important as this little dusty group with their shy smiles and shining eyes, standing a little apart in the sunshine.

A dinner, presided over by Colonel Thom, was served in the headquarters building and then Mannon conducted the General, the Colonel and Cooper over to the MAAG house where the General and the Colonel would spend the night. During their inspection of the house, Hawley suddenly stopped and sniffed. "Maybe I'm losing my marbles," he said, "but I smell horses."

Mannon laughed and explained about his mount. "I hope you won't mind it too much tonight . . ."

"Hell, no," said the General. "Reminds me of Fort Riley. Where did you find a horse up here?"

The Major told them about Colonel Thom and the horse and how he used it to look for training areas. The General and the Colonel then insisted on going downstairs and looking it over, as well as the shower stall and the Sergeant's weights. Mannon pointed out that the horse was a typical Thai mount, not much bigger than a pony and able to practically live on thorns.

"General," he said, "I would like to suggest that since these horses are bred for work around here and in the jungle areas, they should be useful for scouting and packing supplies where there are no roads. I've been thinking of using them in ranger training."

After they had gone back upstairs, Mannon asked the General if he would like a drink. It was the first time during the entire trip that any adviser had even so much as hinted that he had liquor. Hawley looked askance at the offer but the General asked for bourbon and water and, after a pause, the Colonel did likewise.

In the kitchen, where Cooper was helping him get the ice, Mannon asked, "What the hell's wrong, Jim? Did I goof?"

"Far from it," said Cooper. "It's the best remark any adviser has made so far on the trip."

Later in the evening, when the talk got around to training programmes, Mannon said, "General, I'm not satisfied with the guerrilla training. They aren't really getting any."

The General looked at Hawley, who turned to Mannon. "Guerrilla classes are on the schedule, Mannon," he said, with irritation in his voice.

"Yes, sir, they are. But all they do is read from manuals."

"What would you suggest they do?" asked the General.

"I think, sir, that some of the instruction should be conducted out in the jungle. They should be dropped by parachute with only their uniform and maybe a knife. They should live off the land and make their way back here to the post on their own."

Hawley broke in, "The local training schedule has to be fitted into the overall Army training programme. I don't know whether there's any time for this sort of thing . . ."

"But, sir," broke in the Major. "They have plenty of time if they cut out some of the nonsense." He jumped up and looked through his desk. "I've got this month's schedule right here," he said, coming back with a paper in his hand. "Colonel's birthday on the 12th. Holiday. Buddhist ceremony

on the 14th. Holiday. Then the town fair. That means three days of celebration and five days of preparation. In addition to all this, they take off Sundays, although they're Buddhists . . . and Wednesday and Saturday afternoons."

Hawley took off his glasses and rubbed the bridge of his nose. "We appreciate your zeal, Major, but training time is the overall problem of the Thai Army, not a local decision. I hope you haven't been badgering them about this."

Mannon looked crestfallen. "Of course not, Colonel. I just thought you'd like to know about it."

The General broke in. "What other ideas have occurred to you, Major?"

Mannon looked up gratefully. "Well, sir, the lectures on Communism for one thing."

"What's wrong with them?"

"First, they're given by Army people from Bangkok. And men up here just don't buy what Bangkok tells them, no matter how good. Second, the lectures are way over their heads. They're mostly theory and these people don't understand it."

"How do you know?" asked Hawley.

"Because I go and listen to them," said Mannon. "My orderly translates for me."

"Well, you won't have to worry any more about those," said the General. "There is a new series coming out. But I'm glad to hear your comments. It verifies a discussion that Ambassador Murphy and I had on the subject. About your vehicles; I read your comments. What's being done about them?"

"Sir, we finally got a list of every MAAG vehicle they've received. Now we check the daily maintenance by numbers. That's the only way we can determine if they are actually being taken care of."

The General nodded. "How about the rest of their equipment?"

"For one thing, sir," said Mannon, "they should be more careful about the boots they buy. The average shoe size is 5½

to 6½ but the average American boot is larger. In many cases they end up with boots that hurt the soldiers' feet, so whenever they get a chance, the men go without them or else they don't lace them up. And there's the M-1 rifle. It's too heavy for the average Thai. Maybe they should be trained more extensively with the carbine or the 45 automatic. And a 60mm mortar would be easier to handle in the jungle even though it doesn't have the firepower of the 81mm."

The General looked at Mannon for a few moments without speaking. Then, after glancing significantly at Hawley, he said, "Major, you've obviously worked yourself into the picture here very well."

"I've been jotting down my impressions of the Thai as a soldier," said Mannon, going to the desk and returning with several sheets of paper.

The General looked over the papers that Mannon handed him. "I'd like to read these tonight, if you don't mind. Why haven't you put some of these things in your report?"

"Well," Mannon was embarrassed. He glanced at Hawley. "I thought that . . . I didn't know whether anyone was interested. Some of my ideas are probably half-baked . . ."

"We are interested in all your ideas, Major," said the General. "That's part of our job here."

"Very enthusiastic," said Hawley after Mannon had left. "I hope he gets along all right with the Thais up here. That kind of a personality is sometimes difficult to fit into these teams."

The General rose with the sheaf of papers in his hand. "Maybe it's the Thais who should figure out how to get along with him," he said.

In the bedroom, the General propped himself up on his bed and read Mannon's report. It was entitled "The Thai Soldier."

The Thai is a Mongol (as are the Chinese and the Japanese) possessing the two outstanding Mongol characteristics, the vertical fold of skin over the inner canthus which

gives the eye an oblique cast and the cylindrical hair follicle.

He, however, resembles the Japanese more closely than the Chinese and has the following general characteristics :

His average build is 5' 3".

His average weight is 128-135 pounds.

His skin is sallow and he worries about becoming black in the sun.

He resents being classed as a Negro.

He has very good teeth.

His feet are short, wide and tough.

He would rather go barefooted than wear shoes.

He bathes daily, as many as two or three times.

He never goes to sleep before bathing.

He is very conscious about exposing his sexual organs.

He has very good physique with strong back, strong legs and shoulders.

His arms are weak; he carries loads on his shoulders, ordinarily.

His hair is normally black and he uses perfumed oil.

His eyes are brown.

His beard is usually thin and he shaves about every third day.

He is used to working hard.

He is adept at jungle life.

He is adept with weapons but forgets to clean them.

He is courteous and polite.

He learns new ways and methods very fast.

He is very seldom insubordinate to a superior.

He seldom complains.

He seldom writes letters home.

He is not too neat in his dress, due to improper tailoring.

He gets along with others well.

He respects Americans who teach him new ways.

He has patience with him who performs as a leader should.

He very seldom talks about others behind their backs.

He seldom tells a lie. He will conceal the truth and say nothing.

He retires very early.

He requires normally about 8 hours of sleep.

He rises very early.

He does not complain about exterior ailments.

He is loyal to the Buddha.

He never refuses to jump from aircraft.

He is apt to get airsick if in the air for more than 2 hours.

He is used to sleeping on hard surfaces.

He prefers rice and black coffee daily; with coffee sweetened with sugar.

He does not like American cigarettes. They are too strong.

He can understand much English but is afraid to try to speak it.

He is not used to having much money.

He is not apt to think of marriage before he is 30.

He is quite susceptible to dysentery, malaria and the common cold.

He has a tendency to keep new information learned in schools to himself.

He would rather have people come to him and request his services.

He is normally afraid of the dark and believes in ghosts.

He can be trained to correct his fear of ghosts.

He is a very curious person.

He likes to hear about America.

He never thinks of his country being attacked by an enemy.

He has to be reminded that there are enemies without.

He is not too concerned about sanitation but he can be taught.

His feelings can be hurt easily.

He will do everything to please you and make you proud of him if he respects you.

When the inspection party arrived back in Bangkok, it was hard for them to recognise the MAAG office. The interior had been completely repainted, the floors stained and waxed. The snack bar was out of the headquarters, and the downstairs reception room was now the personnel office, filled with desks, typewriters and files. The birdcage was gone. The General now had a small private office and an adjoining conference room. Cooper's desk was out on the front porch within hearing of the Chief.

Colonel White briefed the General on what had happened during his absence, all of which was routine with one exception. The Department of the Air Force in Washington had requested a reply from General Mason personally as to why discussions had been opened with the Thais concerning certain new aircraft before any clearance had been obtained from the Pentagon. A reply had been prepared for the General's signature, explaining that the Thais had evidently misunderstood an oral discussion on the subject.

It took over an hour for the General to read through the complete back-up file. Then he called in Colonel White.

"I don't understand this," he said. "Colonel Harper knew very well that any increase in aircraft would be handled as part of next fiscal year's planning. The subject was not to be brought up until we had restudied the overall defence plan." He pulled a letter out from the middle of the file. "Here's the reason for the donnybrook! It was written to Washington by Harper in an obvious attempt to 'soften them up' in advance, for increased support. It includes statements that are unwarranted and actually incorrect. How did this goddamned letter get out of here without my seeing it?"

"Sir," said Colonel White, obviously shaken, "the department chiefs decide what correspondence is referred to this

office . . . it was obviously a mistake in judgment on his part . . .”

“Mistake in judgment hell!” said the General, flinging the file down on the desk. “As a matter of fact he showed damned good judgment in sending it out of here without my knowledge.”

He leaned back in the chair and, after a moment, picked up a pen and started writing in a notebook, leaving Colonel White standing in the door. He continued to write, without looking up, and Cooper realised that he was watching one of the Old Man’s tricks. Colonel White stood in the doorway, obviously debating whether to ask if that was all, or continue to wait. The General finally looked up at him. “Well, what do you want?”

“Nothing . . . nothing at all, sir,” said the Colonel, flushing. He turned and went back to his office.

After about fifteen minutes, the General called Cooper in and handed him the entire file, with the letter on top. He had signed it. “Hold this for White,” he said.

Nothing more was done about the matter for the rest of the day. The answer to the Air Force had to be in the mail by four-thirty. At three o’clock, Colonel White, obviously ill at ease, walked into the General’s office and Cooper, out at his desk, heard the General’s reply to the muffled question. “See my aide!”

When White came out, Cooper handed him the file and, after a quick glance at the signed letter, the Colonel carried off the papers. A few moments later the General called Cooper into the office. “Jim, tell Colonel Harper that I want to see him at eight-thirty tomorrow morning in my office. And also tell Colonel White to call a conference of all chiefs tomorrow at nine.”

At eight-thirty the following morning, Colonel Harper spent fifteen minutes in the General’s office and emerged, his face a frozen mask.

At nine o'clock the complete staff was assembled in the conference room. The General entered with a pad in his hand. "I have some notes here, made on my trip," he said, seating himself at the head of the table.

"First of all," he began, "I'm not satisfied with the up-country adviser set-up. We've got too many high-ranking officers sitting down here in Bangkok who should be up there working with these Thai units and giving them the benefit of their experience.

"The Air Force units are mostly around Bangkok so they aren't too much involved. Nor is the Navy to any great extent. In this case, it is the Army. I want this headquarters screened, and a list made up of every officer and non-com in it; his status—I mean whether or not he's married, if his wife is here, how many children he has and what his rotation date is. I'm doing this because I don't want to simply penalise the bachelors. I may have to, for a while, but everybody is going to get his share of this."

Colonel Hawley sat back in his chair, looking stunned. He evidently had realised that changes were going to be made, and Cooper knew that he had come to the meeting prepared, if pressed, to set up an ad hoc committee to study the situation, but that was all.

He saw that Colonel White was also shaken up, clasping his hands and glaring at Hawley.

"Do you have any comments, White," asked the General, finally.

"I appreciate the problem, sir," he replied, trying to keep his voice even. "Of course, the heart of the Army is around Bangkok. That's where the bulk of the artillery and tanks is. The up-country units are mostly infantry and they are recruited in the same area in which they serve . . ."

"I realise all that," said the General, impatiently. "But up-country is where the Thais need their best units, not hanging around Government House in Bangkok!"

All the chiefs looked at the General. They obviously couldn't believe he was that naïve. Even Cooper wondered if the General really thought the Prime Minister would ever send his best troops away from Bangkok and thus upset the delicate balance of power that sustained the régime. Cooper could also imagine the howling objections that were going to rise when the officers heard about the up-country programme.

"But, sir," added White, "about the MAAG officers going up-country whose families would have to remain in Bangkok. It would be extremely difficult for them . . ."

"Why?"

The Colonel went on grimly. "I mean regarding such things as cars, for instance. In some cases officers use their assigned vehicles to take their children to school, or take their wives to the clinic and so forth."

The General looked around the table. "I realise it will be a hardship for a while on some," he said, "but when they came over here they were not guaranteed vehicles for such purposes. These cars are furnished by the Thai Government for the use of key officers and non-coms to conduct MAAG business, not to haul wives and children around."

The group around the table glanced at each other. "Sir," said the Navy Commander, "even the Thais recognise the necessity of these vehicles. They've never even mentioned the subject, although they know about it."

"Whether or not the Thais object is beside the point," said the General. "I'm sure Colonel White can arrange for buses to get the children to school. The same arrangement can be made for hauling groceries. As for riding around downtown, there are plenty of civilian taxis and sam-lors available. Are there any more questions?"

Nobody mistook the last statement for a question. All opposition suddenly collapsed.

"Now, Hawley," continued the General, "check over your list of names. Some of the men, of course, will remain in Bangkok. The rest will go up-country. The bachelors and the

married ones with no children can go immediately. The others will take a little longer.

"I want the Personnel Officer to draft a letter to DA requesting a halt in the replacement programme. The new officers scheduled to go up-country should arrive here without their families. Perhaps they can be considered on a hardship tour and be limited to one year."

The staff sat quietly as the General flipped his pad. "I have one more item.

"Beginning next Monday, a copy of every piece of correspondence coming into this headquarters or going out of it will pass over my desk. This includes all letters, memoranda, telegrams. In short, everything."

He paused to let the impact of his remark sink in. Then everyone started talking at once.

"One at a time," said the General, raising his hand. "Let me say that I will leave it to you, under Colonel White's supervision, to work out whatever system you like. Maybe a daily reading file is the answer, I don't know."

Colonel White spoke up. "Sir," he said, "I don't know whether you realise it, but it will hold up our operations . . ."

"Why?"

"Well, if your okay is necessary on every single . . ."

"That's not what I said, Colonel. I didn't mention 'okaying' anything. I said I want to *see* these things. That means that either the original or a copy of all correspondence goes over my desk on the way in and out."

"Sir," said Commander Enright, "much of our Navy correspondence is routine . . . requests for spare parts . . . things like that."

"I'll repeat what I said," replied the General. "Every piece of correspondence, or a copy of it, which comes in or goes out of this headquarters goes over my desk. Is that clear?"

By the next afternoon, Colonel White had prepared a list of personnel in the MAAG headquarters. It contained names,

dependency status, number of children and the remaining months of duty in Thailand. Cooper, looking over Miss Patterson's shoulder as she typed the final copy, noted grimly that his own name was on top. "That son of a bitch!" was his first reaction—he hadn't realised the extent of the Colonel's hatred for him. But, remembering Mannon and the parachute jump at Lampang, he knew he did not actually dislike the idea of an up-country station where he could organise his life as the Major had done. The thought of living without Tongchai, however, swept all other considerations out of his mind and he picked up the list and carried it into the General's office.

"Set up a conference on this in a half-hour," said Mason when Cooper showed him the list. Seeing his aide's name at the top, the General muttered, "Oh Christ!" and drew a line through it.

At the conference it was announced that the Thai Army Headquarters enthusiastically agreed with the idea. What the local commanders might think was not on record.

The discussion opened with consideration of the Parachute School. There were only three paratroop officers in the headquarters—Captain Cooper, Colonel Hawley and Lieutenant Colonel Childs. The G-1 immediately declared that Childs could not be spared.

"Colonel Allard," said the General coldly, "give me just one reason you can't spare him."

Allard realised that he had blundered. The facts were simple. Childs was married but had no children. His pregnant wife was leaving for the U.S. within a week. He had the necessary time left to serve in Thailand. Colonel Allard made no comment as the General, giving him a baleful glare, checked Childs' name in red. "Childs to Lampang," he said crisply. "Who is next?"

Cooper felt a twinge of sympathy for Mannon up in Lampang.

When they had finished, not without some feeble protests, eight officers' names were checked off in red. There was no

baulking over the non-commissioned-officer list. Approximately ten non-coms were reassigned. Only one presented a problem.

The sergeant in charge of the MAAG radio relay station up in Chiang Mai was due to go home shortly. The only qualified replacement for him was a Sergeant Davies, presently stationed in Bangkok. However, Davies had a large family.

Hawley spoke up. "I've been meaning to mention this for some time, General. It's the problem of enlisted men assigned to Thailand who arrive here with large families. Davies has five small children. He has asked for an increase in family allowance which, of course, cannot be granted. He's having a struggle making ends meet. On the civilian market, for instance, Post Toasties cost seventy-five cents a package. Now if we send him up to Chiang Mai, that will leave his wife and five children alone in Bangkok. They won't be able to manage."

"Can't we send someone else?"

"He's the only one really qualified. The alternative is a corporal who is too young for such responsibility. We'll just have to ask for a replacement for Davies. It will take three to six months."

The General thought for a moment. "Why not get another man from Clark Field in the Philippines on an exchange basis?"

"I've checked that, sir. It can be done. They have an unmarried man who would fill the bill."

"Then go ahead. We'll just trade him off, if Clark is agreeable."

Colonel White interrupted. "Davies... isn't he a good-looking Southern boy with light hair? In his middle twenties?"

"That's the one."

"If he's got five kids and can't get by, I wonder how he manages to spend so much time and money in the Bamboo Bar and the Chez Eve? I've seen him there several times... with Thai girls."

"Well, Colonel," said Hawley, "I didn't intend to bring it

up but this guy is quite a ladies' man. Some time ago we got an unofficial complaint from Thai sources about him. He was running around with Thai women down at the Lido. In fact, he got one of them pregnant. This has never come through official channels, so it's not a matter of record."

The General was silent for a moment "The answer, then, is simple," he said. "Ship him and his family to the Philippines. That takes care of his finances and his problems with Thai women."

"I'll inform him, sir."

"Get it done right away. The Chiang Mai station has to be kept in continuous operation."

Late that afternoon, Colonel White came up to Cooper's desk, accompanied by a handsome sergeant with blond hair and an aggrieved look on his face. "Cooper," said Colonel White with a significant look, "see if General Mason is free, will you? Sergeant Davies wants to talk to him."

In a few moments Davies was standing at attention before the General.

"You wanted to see me, Davies?" asked the General.

"Yes, sir. Ah understand from Colonel Hawley, sir, that me and mah family are bein' transferred to Clark Field."

"Well?"

The Sergeant swallowed. "Sir, ah haven't completed mah tour of duty here in Thailand . . ."

"Did the Colonel explain why this was being done?"

"Yes, sir. He did. But he's mad with me because ah asked for an additional allowance for mah family. But mah affairs are all straight now."

"You told him that it was too expensive for you to live here with five small children. Food, clothing, doctor bills . . . everything is too high. And we agree with you. It is. At Clark Field you'll have the post exchange, the commissary, schools, hospitals, everything you need. We can't send you to Chiang Mai and leave your wife and children down here alone."

"But sir, ah don't want to go to Clark Field," said the Sergeant, with a kind of desperation in his voice.

The General was momentarily at a loss. "You said your situation was all straightened out now. In what way?"

"Well, sir, ah mean it just is. Besides, ah like mah job. Ah just want to stay."

"The problem is not, whether you want to stay, although I appreciate your attitude. You don't seem to realise that we are trying to help you, Sergeant. What will your wife do when you are up in Chiang Mai?"

"She can get along all right. We got very nice neighbours, they said they would help out. They even promised to take care of the kids when she goes to the hospital . . ."

"The hospital?"

The Sergeant bit his lip and ran one hand through his hair. "Yes sir," he said. "When she has the baby . . ."

"Your wife is pregnant?"

"Yes, sir. But it'll be quite a while yet . . . six or seven months, maybe."

The General tried to conceal his annoyance. "Sergeant Davies, from what you've told me so far, your situation is worse now than it was before the transfer came up. If it were possible to keep you here, I would. But this is for your own good. You may not realise it now, but when you're back at Clark Field you'll see how much better off you are."

There was a moment of silence and then the Sergeant came to attention. "Yes, sir," he said and rendered a stiff salute and left.

Colonel White appeared in the doorway. "Do we go ahead with the transfer, sir?"

"Right away!"

Cooper was getting in his car at the close of the day as Lieutenant Colonel Childs passed him in the parking lot. The tall, supercilious figure stopped. "Captain Cooper," he said, with unaccustomed geniality, "don't see you around much lately."

A few remarks were made about the dinner at Dick's honouring Mannon's promotion and, as Cooper became noticeably restless, Childs finally got to the point. "Say," he said, "you've never been over to my place. Natalie and I were discussing it the other day. How about coming around for dinner some time?"

Cooper said he would like to and a date was set. Nothing was said about Tongchai, which Cooper thought was rather odd.

On the way home, he wondered at the sudden burst of conviviality. Then he remembered. Childs' name was one of those on the up-country list with the red check mark.

17

After leaving Cooper in the motor park, Lieutenant Colonel Childs got into his Citroen, sick with frustration and anger. He had felt that way from the moment he had laid eyes on the fatal list of up-country assignments and saw his own name neatly ticked off in red. Lampang!

His Thai driver, glancing into the rear-view mirror as the car rolled along New Road, saw the Colonel was disturbed over something. He shrugged. He would never understand the ferungs with their tensions, their blow-ups and quick, nervous laughter. Childs noticed the glances in the mirror and the calm eyes of the driver infuriated him. He was beginning to hate the "Mai Ben Rai" attitude of the Thais anyway and ever since that episode with Cooper in the Thieves' Market he had a feeling that the driver was amused by him.

The real reason for all his problems, he concluded, was his wife, whom he had married before his Thailand assignment. He liked her, but he was not in love with her, nor had he ever really been in love with any woman. In fact, as he thought about it, he wasn't sure even now just how their marriage had come about. He had been visiting his home in Cedar Rapids

on leave after his promotion and his mother had insisted that he squire the "lovely Natalie" around. She was twenty-five, ten years his junior, and he had known her all his life. Out of college for about five years, she didn't appear to be interested in anything much except, of course, in getting a husband and he realised now that escorting her around had been Mother Childs' own idea all along—probably a response to social pressures aimed at the Lieutenant Colonel who enjoyed the arts and society but remained unmarried although he was thirty-five years old.

Not that he had minded particularly at first. Natalie was a blonde, rather attractive girl with a good figure and a somewhat horsy smile that served to cover up her basic stupidity. He wouldn't have minded had they been assigned to Paris or Rome or Bonn where they could have moved in military circles with dignity and a certain amount of gaiety as the more mature members of the "younger" set. But when he found that he was being assigned to Thailand, in the wilds of Southeast Asia, he felt she should have waited for him at home, like a war bride. But, oh no, she insisted on coming with him.

There had even been an argument about the house. She had actually wanted to live in Bankapi, along with all the other MAAG wives, in some hideous utility apartment with neighbours dropping in, weekly bridge parties and all the boring stupidities of Army life. He remembered the quiet battle he had waged to get their charming little house, tucked away on the far side of town in the really exclusive section of Bangkok directly across the street from the mansion of Prince Yuthakan. (She had screamed at him in a moment of anger, "What difference does that make, you toady! They don't know we exist—or care!")

He remembered with what high hopes he had moved in, and his daydreams of the small, intimate parties they would hold with the really important people . . . a few members of the French or British Embassies, and higher-ranking Thais. He had imagined the British Ambassador dropping in on Guy and

Natalie who, gay and charming, would be waiting with a shaker of his favourite cocktails. He would sink into a chair and say, "Guy, I can't tell you how much I appreciate this little hideaway where I can relax. Had a terrific row today . . . that Indian affair I told you about . . ."

In spite of his efforts, it had all come to nothing. The really important embassy crowd was well-nigh unapproachable. He had corralled a few of the lesser lights. The Dutch, however, sat like bumps on a log and wolfed down food and drinks and smiled in their bovine way. The Indians lived behind such a barricade of taboos and restrictions against food and drink that entertaining them was a nightmare. Besides, their slow, elusive smiles always gave him a vague feeling of discomfort, as though they privately considered him a figure of fun.

Only an assistant staff officer, he wasn't invited to the affairs at Government House. Finally, in desperation, he had even asked some of the more erudite MAAG people over. But that had turned out to be impossible; all they talked about were MAAG affairs and the good fishing at Sattahib Bay.

Then Natalie had announced that she was pregnant and he had begun his campaign to get her back to Mother Childs in Cedar Rapids. He had visions of regaining his old free life as a bachelor; available to fill in at parties, a candidate for the "Most Sought-after Guest in Bangkok," where his brilliant wit and sly innuendoes would make him a cherished visitor. And now, when this last desperate hope was just about to be realised, this goddamned order transferred him into exile. As if that weren't enough, his assistant would again be the smart-aleck Mannon.

All afternoon he had scouted around to see whether there was a chance that the order could be rescinded. His boss, Colonel Allard, was no help. He had given up after admitting that Childs was the best paperwork man he had ever worked with. So one man was left. The General. That overbearing bastard who rearranged everything in the Headquarters to get himself a nice new office, who moved the G-1 from their cosy

set-up out into the open area downstairs and who now wanted to see every damned paper that moved through MAAG.

The invitation to Cooper had been a spur-of-the-moment decision. He wasn't quite sure of Cooper. He had seen him around in the headquarters, always genial and polite, and there was that evening in Dick's when he brought in the beautiful Thai girl. But he also remembered the nasty episode in the Thieves' Market when he and his wiseacre Thai friend had foisted the Buddha head on him. Cooper probably knew everything that went on in the damned headquarters. Maybe after a few drinks he would let down the bars and Childs could find out what his chances were of getting out of the up-country assignment. It was his last chance, anyhow.

He flung himself out of the car. "Usual time," he said to the driver and did not smile back at the driver's grinning face. He hated Thais at that moment.

When no one answered his first knock he pounded with his fist, catching his hand in mid air as the door suddenly opened and Natalie, with her tousled hair and ungainly figure, appeared. She was smiling, which only made matters worse.

18

When the date for Childs' dinner was fixed and the Colonel had left the motor pool, Cooper dismissed his chauffeur and drove off in the Vauxhall by himself. He turned off New Road at a certain little lane that led down to the house by the river bank, where he knew Tongchai would be waiting.

The door opened at his first tap and she was standing before him. Wordlessly they embraced. Sitting on the divan, Tongchai started to tell him about the events of the past week. His lips buried in her mali-scented hair, he whispered, "Not now, darling . . . we've got to make up seven long, lonely nights . . ."

Afterwards, lying across the pillows in the warm intimacy of spent desire, they discussed, drowsily, what had happened since

they were last together. "Prasert will come tonight," she said. "He say he never can find you at the hotel." Then she showed him the teak panelling that had been delivered while he was away and together they discussed how it should be affixed to the wall. In a short while he donned a pair of blue jeans and zoris and had gone to work on the pile of neatly trimmed wood.

The decoration of Tongchai's room had begun quite casually. One night, in Chinatown, Cooper had bought a Cantonese hanging to cover a stain on the wall. On his next visit he had repaired a broken louvre in the window overlooking the river. From then on, like their love, his do-it-yourself efforts gathered momentum. Little by little, the room took on the outward characteristics of their happiness.

He had masked one wall with monk's cloth which served as a background for several antique Thai bronzes. They shopped for the thick white rug which hid the rough floor. The bed was replaced by a divan, covered with saffron-coloured damask that matched the new curtains over the louvred window.

It had been Cooper's idea to panel one wall in teak and just before the up-country trip they had selected the wood. Now he went to work, carefully fitting and hammering the strips into place. The electric fan did not quite dispel the heat and Tongchai, from time to time, ceased sewing on the new chair-cover and, taking a towel, wiped off his broad shoulders. Each ministration called for a kiss and, occasionally, a long embrace.

While he worked, the gramophone was softly playing their favourite song—the Ramwong they had first danced to in the Chez Eve, entitled "Love Is a Lonely Road." It had no words so they made up their own and sometimes they would sing them together, correcting each other or adding newer, sometimes bawdy ones.

They were surrounded by mementos, including the Buddha head Cooper had found on one of their trips to the old Siamese capital of Ayuthia. There were silly things, like the feather that had floated out into the audience during a battle scene at the Silpakorn Theatre. Most cherished of all was a doll they had

found in a curio shop . . . a little Thai dancing boy, about a foot high, constructed of pale yellow silk and dressed in a brilliant costume of green and silver topped by a tall Thai headdress. They had named him "Pon" and Cooper referred to him as their "son."

They had been busy for about an hour when a knock at the door announced the arrival of the only other person in Thailand who knew about their secret world. It was Prasert who, after greetings and a glass of bourbon, seated himself on the divan and said, "Please, Jimmy, *must* you play that same song one hundred times?"

When Cooper had finished his work for the evening, he and Tongchai joined Prasert for a drink. Sprawled in an easy chair with Tongchai sitting on the floor beside him, her head against his knee, Cooper told Prasert about their up-country trip and how long the seven days away from Bangkok had seemed. "And when I walked in the door tonight . . .," he had begun when Prasert stopped him.

"No, Jimmy," he said. "I don't want to hear about it . . ."

Cooper looked at him in surprise. "Why not?"

"You are happy and you want to talk, but the gods are jealous of happiness. Do not tempt them," he replied simply.

A little later Prasert noticed certain glances passing between the two, whereupon he pointedly yawned and rose, declaring he was too tired to stay any longer. On his way out, he looked around the room. Noting in one corner the little kitchenette that Cooper had installed, with its red spice cans on the white shelf with the brass chain supports, and seeing the cunningly designed curio shelves suspended on another wall and little Pon propped up in one of the chairs, he was reminded of the Taj Mahal, which bore in every aspect . . . the unmistakable traces of love.

When he had left, Tongchai said, "You are tired, Jimmy, and you should not be working tonight. Come and rest for a while," and she led him to the divan where both of them sank down on the pillows, their fingers entwined.

The sun was shining brightly when Cooper suddenly awoke and jumped up. He was still in blue jeans and the lights were burning. "Great God, what time is it?" he muttered. A glance at his watch showed it to be ten minutes past eight. Tongchai had also awakened and for the next few moments the room was in wild turmoil as Cooper changed into his uniform. "The General has a meeting with the Prime Minister at ten," he said. "I've just got time to get to the hotel and shave. I'll see you tonight." And after a quick kiss, he was gone.

When he finally arrived at the MAAG headquarters the General was preparing to leave for Government House and after explaining that he had encountered "some delay along New Road" to the Old Man, who received his explanation with a dubious nod, they set off for the Prime Minister's office.

Seated on the now familiar yellow brocade settee the General consulted his notebook. "I've just returned from my inspection of MAAG installations up-country, Your Excellency, and I also had a chance to look at the Thai units as well."

The Prime Minister waved away General Kawee's translation. "We appreciate your interest, General. What did you find out . . . especially about the Thai units?"

"On the whole, they looked good. But there are several items that came up which I'd like to talk over with you. First of all, your border units do not have enough artillery support. For some reason it appears that the artillery is stationed here in Bangkok instead of up there where it belongs. The units that are up there are at least twenty miles from the border. They are supposed to move forward if needed, but the roads are unpaved and the bridges are too fragile for any sustained traffic."

The Prime Minister nodded. "This is a problem we have been concerned about for some time," he said. "The state of roads in that part of the country is bad and we have no money

to fix them. As you know, Air Marshal Wicharn is also in charge of roads and transportation. It is most difficult."

"I would like to suggest," continued the General, ignoring the Prime Minister's hint at political complications, "that, considering the condition of the highways, it would be wise to move more units up there and out of Bangkok. You should also try using lighter artillery. I refer to the 75mm pack howitzer which my country used during World War II on airborne missions. These particular weapons can be broken down into several loads to be carried by pack animals. Assembled, they can be pulled by horses or, if necessary, by manpower."

General Kawee said, "Yes, I remember them from my guerrilla days in North Thailand. But your country doesn't use them any more . . ."

The General nodded. "That's true. We now use heavier pieces. But the point I'm making is that, under certain conditions, the 75 is your best weapon."

General Kawee replied, "If they are obsolete in your country, you probably have a lot of them in excess. And, of course, they are cheaper than the newer guns . . ."

The General's face flushed. "That's not what I'm talking about," he snapped. Then Cooper saw him take a deep breath and continue in an even voice. "My recommendation is based on military usage and has nothing whatever to do with price."

The Prime Minister raised his hand to silence Kawee and turned to the General. "Please, General. I would like to hear more. You say these howitzers can be pulled by hand. How do you mean that?"

"I mean," continued the General, "that the paratroopers can rig up a six-man harness."

"Men harnessed to guns?"

"Yes. And they can move them pretty fast if they have to."

"General Mason," said the Prime Minister, "I understand. And I think it is a good idea. Have your advisers discuss the matter with my people. I assume that not all the artillery need be . . ."

"No, sir," interrupted the General. "I was going to suggest that only units on the northern border use them."

The Prime Minister nodded and the General flipped a page when he suddenly paused. "Oh, yes. About the artillery in Bangkok . . ."

There was a long pause and the Prime Minister and General Kawee exchanged glances. General Kawee cleared his throat. "Of course, we must consider our reserve, General. By holding them in a central position, they are available for use wherever they are needed . . ."

"It would appear to me that a central position might well be in Chiang Mai rather than Bangkok," said the General.

"On the other hand," the Prime Minister replied, "with the lighter guns you mentioned, we would be able to move units where they belong. Right now our poor road net forces us to keep them near the city . . ."

Cooper smiled inwardly at the adroit manner in which both the Thais had sidestepped the issue. The General made no further comment but flipped a page. Cooper, glancing up at the Prime Minister, could have sworn that he had winked at him.

"My next subject," continued the General, "concerns horses for use up-country."

"Horses?" chorused the Prime Minister and Kawee.

"Yes, sir. In the northern jungle, aerial observation is almost useless but horses could be very effective for reconnaissance and packing supplies and equipment. Missouri mules might be better but I don't see how we could get them. You already have the small Mongolian-type ponies. I understand they are tough and wiry and eat almost anything."

"But General," said Kawee, "we already have a cavalry unit . . ."

"In Bangkok," replied the General. "Come to think of it, what do you use it for anyhow?"

"Parades!" said the Prime Minister with a wry smile.

"Are they a special breed?" asked Mason.

"No," interjected Kawee, "they're just Australian horses

that were originally brought here for horse racing. In a few generations they breed down until they are almost dogs... that's why we must keep importing new studs."

The Prime Minister broke in "Perhaps with help from MAAG we could get some Australian stock to breed them up to size. But we must be sure to keep General Kawee out of this or we will end up in the horse-racing business!"

They laughed and the General flipped another page. "The next subject is touchy," he said, "and concerns your senior officers."

The Prime Minister glanced at General Kawee and both of them leaned forward with close attention. Cooper's pen was momentarily suspended above his notebook. He couldn't quite believe that the General was going to criticise the senior members of the coup party itself!

"Your junior officers, on the whole, are sharp," he began. "Most of them have been to American service schools where they learn the techniques of modern warfare. However, when they return, they are under the command of older officers, many of whom have not been to these schools. Lacking this modern training, some of them find it difficult to properly assess these new ideas."

There was a moment of silence. Cooper could hear the hum of the electric fans and the crunch of the sentry's boots on the gravel outside the windows.

"What do you suggest we do, General?" asked the Prime Minister quietly.

"I would suggest a refresher course, such as we give our own senior officers at Leavenworth, from time to time, to bring them up to date on modern techniques."

The Prime Minister and General Kawee sat back in their chairs and exchanged looks. Cooper marvelled at the audacity of the Old Man who had bluntly said what nobody else in Thailand probably ever dared say before.

"But General," said Kawee, "we have a good staff college right here in Bangkok. It is patterned after Leavenworth and

is very hard to get into. Only our best officers go there."

Cooper glanced at the General, remembering Captain Sawat's explanation of how he would be able to enter, but the General's face remained impassive. "I realise that," he said, "but techniques of warfare change fast nowadays. It is difficult to keep up with them."

The Prime Minister studied his clasped hands for a moment. "You must realise, General," he said, "that my country is small and good men are scarce. So the capable ones have many jobs, both civilian and military. We just do not have enough good men to go around. I am not surprised that some of them need . . . what you call . . . brushing up."

"Every good man has at least five jobs!" interjected Kawee.

Cooper glanced up at the Prime Minister with involuntary admiration at the adroit description of the political situation.

"I understand," continued the General, blandly, "so I am suggesting a 'crash' course of a week or two."

The Prime Minister pursed his lips. "I will consider it," he said, and then, fixing the General with his dark eyes, he added, "perhaps as you travel around, you might look over the senior officers. Could you give me a private report on what you think of them?"

The General returned his look and then smiled. "I really don't think that would be a good idea, Excellency," and he shook his head. All of them, including Cooper, could not help grinning at the General's prompt rejection of any involvement in politics.

"I'm glad to hear you say that, General," said Kawee. "Otherwise I might find myself a corporal!"

The General once more consulted his notebook. "I have a note here on guerrilla-warfare training. Not enough stress is being placed on this programme. There are certain aspects of this type warfare that can only be taught in the field. The current programme, I have found, is mostly theory. Men should move out into the woods and live there for a certain length of time. They should move in and out of villages, communicate

with each other and so on. And I think eventually all of your soldiers should be trained this way, not only the rangers."

There was a pause and the Prime Minister exchanged a few words in Thai with Kawee. "You are suggesting," he said, "that we make every soldier a guerrilla?"

"At least give him the fundamental training."

The Prime Minister stirred on the settee. "I agree, in principle, with what you say. But I would like to give it further thought."

"One final subject, Excellency. Why don't you hold the big joint manoeuvre along your northern border?"

The Prime Minister smiled. "Burma and Laos will think we are serious. It might even start a war! I think I would prefer the southern coast . . ."

The General shut his notebook, as the Prime Minister said, "The things we have discussed today will cost money and our agreement for this year is already in effect . . ."

"If you are in favour of the new ideas," said the General, "we might cut some of the Air Force and Navy supplies from this year's programme."

The Prime Minister nodded and rose. "We will consider it," he said. "And I do appreciate your candour, General Mason."

On the way back to MAAG headquarters, General Mason stopped in to see Ambassador Murphy.

"I can hardly believe it, Ed," said the Ambassador after he had heard what transpired at the meeting. "Or maybe I can," he added, surveying the burly figure of the General. "The Prime Minister is a soldier himself and your approach probably did the trick. I wish I could have seen his face when you told him that his coup-party people needed to be bucked up!"

"He brushed off the guerrilla training, though."

"Remember whom you're talking to, Ed! The Prime Minister is the man who was kicked out of office by the guerrilla forces. Could you honestly expect him to deliberately promote this kind of training now?"

"But I'm not referring to a bunch of half-assed partisans running through the jungle knocking off messengers and then getting whole villages wiped out in reprisal. I am referring to an organised force, directed from Bangkok, working in conjunction with the regular troops."

The Ambassador nodded. "But suppose they ever had to use these guerrilla forces? What happens if one or two of the leaders collect enough followers to challenge the régime again? They'll be the heroic saviours of the country! Suppose Pridi comes back from China and makes a deal with them? Would those men up north know enough to resist?"

The General shifted in his chair. "That's a chance he has to take, I suppose."

"Then there's the psychological hazard too," continued the Ambassador. "If he started a guerrilla programme of this size it might look as though the country *intended* to surrender to an invader even before a war started."

The General did not reply and Mad Mike put his hand on Mason's arm. "Don't misunderstand, Ed. I'm not throwing cold water on your idea. It's excellent. I'm only playing the devil's advocate for the moment. I'll be willing to bet the Prime Minister will buy at least part of the programme. But for the love of God, be sure your advisers hold down the talk about rights and privileges of freedom. Let them get the idea across that freedom has responsibilities!"

20

It took Cooper so long to find the Childs' house he was afraid he would be late for dinner. He finally located it, across a klong and hidden in a mass of banana trees, a small wooden house with a well-cared-for lawn and gravel drive. He was met at the door by the Colonel, his face beaming with hospitality. Mrs. Childs was waiting in the living room.

Cooper expressed admiration for the room which was small

but tastefully furnished in modern style with Siamese touches. Books were in evidence and a hi-fi set was playing softly when he arrived. Asked what he would like to drink, he chose their own favourite, a martini. As he talked with Natalie he could see through the open bookcase into the kitchen where the Colonel was pouring the drinks, already prepared in a fruit jar, into a silver cocktail shaker.

He learned that Mrs. Childs was a graduate of a Western college, that she didn't particularly enjoy Thailand and that she was more or less resigned to going back to Cedar Rapids. The Colonel came back into the living room and elaborately poured out the cocktails, commiserating the while that real dry martinis were so hard to come by in Bangkok. "Lemon twist, of course," he said, archly, to Cooper as though daring him to request an olive or an onion.

Childs beamed at the compliment Cooper paid him on the Buddha head which he had obtained in the Thieves' Market and which he had mounted on a polished teak base.

Several references were made during conversation to Mrs. Childs' impending return to the States. She was going to stay with "Mother Childs" during the remainder of her pregnancy while the Colonel would, in his own words, be "forced to batch it" during her absence. Cooper had a chance to see Mother Childs when the Colonel got out a projector and showed, with pride, coloured slides of the trip Natalie and he had made from Cedar Rapids to the West Coast, during which they were accompanied by Mother and Daddy Childs. There were numerous shots of Mother with her arm around Guy's shoulder. Only one shot showed Natalie and Guy together, standing a little self-consciously in front of Old Faithful. Mother Childs had taken it, Guy explained. It was out of focus, evidently taken by an unsteady hand.

After too many mediocre martinis they went into the dining room for dinner, which was served after a short dissertation by the Colonel on the fact that the true connoisseur (presumably Cooper in this case) realised that California wines were fully

equal to the best French wines and that only parvenus insisted otherwise. After having seen the martini routine in the kitchen, Cooper wondered why Childs simply hadn't decanted his supermarket purchase into a vintage French bottle.

The meal progressed, and Cooper became increasingly curious about why he had received the invitation. His polite attitude and careless acceptance of everything had evidently confused the Colonel.

Cooper's only *faux pas* involved the Colonel's books. He had noticed a row of classics emanating from a book club which specialised in fancy bindings. In fact, Cooper had belonged to the same club until he discovered that the classics were "abridged for modern reading." Idly, he had picked up a copy of *Moby Dick*. "Ah," Childs had said with a sigh, "Call me Ishmael . . ." and then Cooper had opened it. A loud crackling of the glue revealed that it had never been opened before and he was afraid for a moment that the book had come apart. He hastily put it back and made no further reference to their library.

During dinner Childs discussed Elsie Webster's magazine article on Thailand, Buddhism, and the Thai propensity for fortune telling. Then he mentioned his new up-country assignment and how much he would enjoy leaving Bangkok and getting out with troops again. He couldn't resist a few remarks about Major Mannon. "That's the kind of officer we need," he said, "and I look forward to working with him. Nothing like a Master paratrooper!" While he extolled Mannon's virtues Childs was thinking glumly that Mannon probably polished his own boots every night, was an expert pistol and rifle shot and could, in all likelihood, assemble a machine gun while blindfolded. Probably knew every goddamned regulation regarding training too. And liked "C" rations! Jesus Christ!

"Can't imagine how a paperwork man like me got a chance to get to Lampang," he said, desperately. Cooper hadn't risen to the bait. Cooper smiled slightly, helping himself to more dessert, but making no comment.

"Haven't talked to the General yet about this new assignment," Childs said, wondering just exactly how close to the throne Cooper really was. Maybe he was only a glorified clerk, he mused, remembering the shorthand routine. "Of course," he added aloud, "it will be somewhat of a hardship for me. Got myself set up down here."

There was still no comment, only an expression of polite interest on Cooper's face.

"Hope my allergy won't start acting up on me!" Childs threw in his last reserve argument.

"Do you have an allergy?" asked Cooper, noting Natalie's look of surprise.

"Something fierce," said Childs. "I've even kept it from Natalie," he added, throwing her a javelin glance. "That's why I've always managed to . . . or always *tried*, I should say . . . to keep away from . . ." He was absolutely at a loss as to what he was supposed to keep away from and he had no idea what Lampang was like. ". . . to keep away from . . . rice paddies . . ." he finished, lamely.

"Then you'll be safe in Lampang," said Cooper, encouragingly. "There aren't any rice paddies within miles." He sipped his coffee. "Good thing you're not affected by the jungle, though."

Childs controlled his breathing as he finished his coffee. "Why don't we retire to the living room and hear some music . . . good music, I mean."

Cooper, he had decided, was a perfect aide-de-camp. A fourteen carat, gold-plated son of a bitch!

21

During the weekend flight to the outlying units, the MAAG pilot, stopping at Lampang to deliver the mail, took a cigarette break with Sergeant Kelly.

"Well," he said, flipping away his butt and looking at his

watch, "I've got to run. Give my regards to Major Mannon. Hope he likes his new boss. He should be up here before long. Colonel Childs."

"Childs? The G-1 man? The Major's old boss?"

"Yes. The Old Man's sending him up here as chief of the team."

"Are you sure?" asked Sergeant Kelly incredulously.

"What the hell do you mean, am I sure? Of course I am. Mason's finally cleaning out the Bangkok headquarters. Probably got sick of looking at all that brass hanging around the snack bar."

The pilot climbed into the cockpit. Just before he slid the door shut he called down, "Tell Mannon he has my sympathies."

That night, after hearing the news from Kelly, the Major made an entry in his journal.

Heard today that Childs is going to be assigned as Chief up here. He will, of course, be in command. All I can figure is that I was wrong in my estimate of the General. He's like all the others.

Everything I've done is just about to be swept away by that bastard. To send a jerk like that up here proves that Hawley finally won out. I see now I should have kept my mouth shut. All I did was convince them that I'm some kind of a nut who needs watching.

How the hell the Thais will ever survive MAAG is beyond me. They were just starting to pay attention to what Kelly and I said and now they send Childs! He and Colonel Thom will never make out because Thom will see through that frustrated fairy in about one minute.

To hell with it. I've done my best. I'll keep it up but it will be sheer hell watching everything go down the drain. With any luck maybe Childs will flip his lid up here.

He closed the journal and went into the kitchen and got

himself a cup of coffee. The Sergeant was sprawled in a chair in the living room reading.

"This guy Omar Khayyam had the right idea," said Kelly, and quoted from a paperback he had in his hand. "Come, fill the Cup, and in the fire of Spring your Winter-garment of Repentance fling . . ."

"I didn't know you liked poetry," said Mannon, blowing on the hot coffee.

"I don't. Except that Omar is kind of special . . ."

"Yeah. 'Mai Ben Rai' in Persian."

22

The annual seven-day fair held at the Premane parade ground across the street from the Chakri Hotel was a big event in Bangkok. For almost a week, Cooper had watched lumber being stacked on the grass, lights being strung up, and, finally, the erecting of booths and stages with all the bright appurtenances of a Thai carnival. He also noticed a gradual increase in the number of hotel guests.

The impact of the fair reached MAAG headquarters, where Peggy Patterson, in particular, seemed to develop a slight fever over the whole proceeding. She made numerous trips using MAAG vehicles, all of which she attributed, in some vague fashion, to the fair.

She informed Cooper that she was moving into the Chakri Hotel for the opening weekend. "I'll probably be seeing you around, Jim," she added, "so be sure and keep some time open so I can repay you for that drink." He assured her he would, wincing at the thought of her proximity for a full weekend.

Late Thursday afternoon, General Mason, who was scheduled to accompany the Ambassador on a trip to Singapore for three days, called Cooper into his office. "What are you planning to do over the weekend?" he asked genially.

"I thought I'd see the fair, of course, and maybe I'll go to Bang San."

"Too bad you don't play golf. Then you could come along with me and the Ambassador to Singapore," said the General. "Are you going with your friend . . . what's his name?"

"Prasert? Oh, no. I will probably go this time with Tongchai . . ."

"Tongchai?"

"Yes, sir. Tongchai Thanom. She's a Thai girl."

The General looked up at him. "A Thai girl? I didn't know you were acquainted with any Thai girls that well. How did you happen to meet her?"

"We met the first night I got here, at the cocktail lounge in the Chakri. And I've been seeing her since. Her father is Nai Thanom; he's Professor of Humanities at Chakri University. He went to Princeton for a year."

The General smiled. "That's nice. I take it we have a romance going on."

"Oh, I don't know whether you'd quite call it that," said Cooper.

"The Ambassador mentioned seeing you at the Chez Eve some time ago with a Thai. Is that the one?"

"Yes, sir. I guess there were a lot of people I didn't see that night!"

"The Ambassador, as I recall, thought she was quite a dish," said the General. "You must bring her over to the house for dinner some evening. I'm sure Mrs. Mason would also like to meet her."

"That's very nice of you, General."

"How will you get to Bang San?"

"I'll drive the Vauxhall, I suppose."

"You mean just the two of you?"

"It will be only for the day," said Cooper, "and her family isn't that strict . . ."

The General frowned. "I didn't mean I thought you were going for the weekend," he said. "I only meant that you can't

be too careful about relationships with the Thais, you know. Upper-class people over here are quite strict. And you just don't want anybody putting the wrong interpretation on it. Sometimes people make them out to be more serious than they are . . ."

Cooper felt a touch of resentment at the General's estimate of the situation. The General himself seemed a little embarrassed.

"I understand, sir," said Cooper.

"It's easy, sometimes, to get caught up in a situation that you didn't plan on . . ."

"Yes, sir."

Cooper finished emptying the "Out" basket as quickly as he could and was leaving the office when the General said, "When the Ambassador first mentioned it, I thought he was mistaken and that the girl was Miss Lindsey of the Embassy or one of the other girls over there."

Back at his desk, Cooper tossed the contents of the basket on the blotter and lit a cigarette. So the General didn't approve. He had made that clear in his last remark. Well, screw him, Cooper said to himself.

When the General arrived home that night, Mrs. Mason was packing for his trip. He looked over his suitcase, which she had left open for a last-minute check. "Frankly," he said, "I'm not looking forward to this trip. I suppose Mad Mike and I will sit around in the Raffles the whole damned time. I wish he played golf."

"It won't be too bad, Ed," said Mrs. Mason. "Mad Mike is fun when he gets going."

"If Cooper played golf he could come along. But no, he told me he's going to the beach with a girl friend."

"Girl friend?"

"Yes. Remember Murphy telling us about seeing him with a Thai girl at the Chez Eve. That's the one."

"A Thai girl? Oh, Ed, are you sure?"

"Cooper told me himself."

"Is it serious, do you think? Who is she?"

"I don't know how serious it is. Probably nothing at all. He said her name was . . . Hong Kong or something. Father is a professor at Chakri. Liberal arts, I think."

"At least it isn't one of those . . . you know . . . dance hall girls. Ed, what can we do about it?"

"What do you mean? It isn't any of our business."

"But suppose it's serious?"

He stopped checking the suitcase and looked up at her. "Then it's serious. There's no law that says he can't fall for a Thai . . ."

"But Jim's such a nice boy. I don't think we should just stand by and . . ."

"Now Eleanor," he said firmly. "You are being ridiculous. There is no point in making a court case out of it. And anything we could say would just make it worse. Let's leave him alone. It'll probably blow over after a while."

"But Ed, sometimes those things just don't blow over."

"She's evidently a nice girl. From a good family."

"That's what I mean. *Especially* if she's a nice girl . . ."

"Eleanor, he's over twenty-one. He's a captain. There isn't anything we can do about it. What's come over you anyway? You know we never interfere. We'd be fools to get involved."

"But Ed, he's your aide . . ."

"All the more reason to stay clear. Now where is that new sports jacket . . . the Madras one?"

When Cooper arrived at the hotel that night, he could see the frantic last-minute preparations going on at the parade ground. Opening night was about an hour away and the hotel walls seemed to channel all the fury right into the lobby. He recognised several familiar faces from various embassies. He waved to Mr. Blair across the lobby and then he saw Peggy Patterson. "Hi Jim," she called out. "Remember our date!"

I'm in 212. Stop by for a drink and don't dare say you can't."

"What time," he called back.

"Sevenish!"

He was meeting Tongchai at eight, so at seven-thirty, in his newly pressed slacks and white shirt, he knocked on 212. Inside he could hear a gramophone blaring. A tenor was lamenting, "Mimi, Thy Tiny Hands Are Frozen," which seemed particularly inappropriate in Bangkok.

"Come in!"

Peggy was sitting on the divan, in a batik housecoat. Her legs were bare and her white, plump feet were thrust into open-toed rattan sandals.

"Entrez-vous!" she cried, although he had already entered, and as he approached the divan she extended her hand, palm down, as though she expected him to kiss it. He shook hands, a little self-consciously, and sat down.

"What'll you have?" she asked brightly. "Whiskey soda, whiskey water or whiskey Coke, my God!"

The line, Cooper recalled, was Tallulah Bankhead's. "Whiskey water will be fine," he said. She rose and started to mix the drink.

"First one's served by me. From then on, you're on your own, Jim." She sat down again and picked up her glass. Cooper smiled and raised his drink.

The din outside was noticeable above the soaring voice of the tenor. The loudspeakers of the fair had come to life. Music, speech-making and the Chinese theatre all contributed to the overwhelming cacophony. Through the french windows they glimpsed the winking lights of the booths, the floodlighted palm trees with garlands of red, green and blue lights in the dusk. In the background, the soaring roofs and spires of the Royal Palace loomed, weird and wonderful in the reflected glow.

"I always stay here the first weekend of the fair," she was saying, and rattled the ice in her glass.

Cooper nodded his head and looked out of the windows.

"Fabulous looking, isn't it?" he commented politely, thinking how much Tongchai would enjoy seeing it.

"Oh, I don't suppose I'd go quite that far," said Peggy. "But it is sort of fun."

Looking out of the windows together they could see the tiny, dancing pinpoints of light from the paraffin flares in the stalls and the dark outlines of people slowly moving along the fairway.

"I suppose you've seen all the sights of Bangkok," said Peggy.

"I've seen the important ones," he said. "My friend Prasert pointed out a lot of things to me. Everything the Americans know about Bangkok comes from people like Anna Leonowens . . . and most of her information was wrong. She talked about the Emerald Buddha. Of course it isn't emerald at all, it's chrysoprase. And it doesn't sit on a golden pyramid sixty foot high. It's a gilded platform and it's thirty foot high. And the floor of the temple isn't gold. It's brass. If she hadn't been a missionary I'd say she was potted when she wrote most of it."

They stepped out on to the balcony.

"Too bad Miss Webster didn't see the fair when she wrote her article," said Peggy. "Imagine what she could have done with that," and her arm encompassed the glowing iridescence before them. "But God almighty the racket! How do you suppose these people stand it? Of course the natives put up with it all the time, living the way they do, I mean. In one room over a klong somewhere . . ."

Mercifully for Cooper, her monologue was interrupted by a loudspeaker which suddenly burst forth with, "Oh, You Can't Break My Heart, It's Been Broken Before."

There was a sudden shower of green stars in the sky as a rocket burst and the Royal Palace shimmered under the eerie glow. Cooper glanced downwards and saw Tongchai approaching the front entrance of the hotel. Peggy's eyes followed his and she turned to him. "That's your girl friend, isn't it?"

He nodded.

"Have you thought about what I said down in the lounge?" she asked softly.

He nodded . . .

"It doesn't make any difference at all, does it?" she asked almost in a whisper. He shook his head. "I didn't really think it would," she added. "All right, I know you want to go now. Before you leave, how about one kiss for Cinderella . . .?"

Lightly he kissed her. Her arms went around his neck and for a moment she clung to him. Then they stepped back in the room and as he reached the door she called out, "Have fun, Jim. I should be so lucky!"

Arm in arm, Cooper and Tongchai walked through the fair, past the fantastic papier-mâché towers, outlined with coloured fluorescent tubing, little bamboo booths displaying piles of brilliantly coloured sarongs and pakomas. There were stands heaped high with Japanese plastic toys. They stopped at a while-you-wait photo booth where a Chinese boy industriously washed prints in full view of the prospective customers and passers-by critically studied the various pictures hung up to dry.

"We don't have a picture together, Tongchai," said Cooper. "Come on. Let's go in." They pushed the brocaded curtain aside and a Chinese woman with a tight hairdo motioned them in front of a canvas backdrop picturing the Temple of the Dawn. They stood arm in arm and smiling as the flash went off. "You wait outside," the woman said, pocketing the ten ticals.

In a few moments the Chinese boy deftly slipped the prints into paper folders and handed them over. Examining them together, they were pleased with the likenesses and Tongchai slipped one print in her handbag—"for the room," she said.

They walked on, past food booths piled high with red and white sausages. The shallow bowls of livers and intestines looked picturesque under the coloured lights, and the odour of

frying rice-dough cakes was good. Every few moments the swish of rockets could be heard and great overhead bursts of stars momentarily drenched everyone's face in vivid red or yellow.

They stopped at a stall where an old Thai woman with a man's haircut, her lips stained with betel nut, sat beside a pile of hollowed bamboo sections, each stuffed with glutinous rice. "You must try one of these. They are very good," said Tongchai. They walked on, each holding a bamboo stalk and using a paper spoon to dig out the sweet rice.

They came to the brilliantly painted Chinese outdoor theatre, the stage framed by a proscenium of coloured tubing. Accompanied by a Chinese orchestra of shrill pipes and clashing cymbals, the actors and actresses moved about the stage in high-soled white shoes, swirling crimson, saffron and silver robes about them as they performed an ancient Chinese drama . . . hopping four or five steps to indicate a journey of many miles . . . empresses in glittering headdresses expiring from illnesses with a single cough . . . warlords surrendering vast kingdoms with the gesture of a hand.

Tiring of the theatre, they strolled past booths blazing with jewellery—a bewildering jumble of rhinestones and diamonds, synthetic rubies and black star sapphires.

"Do you see anything you like, Tongchai?" asked Cooper. Tongchai shook her head. Finally they arrived at a stall displaying pieces of bamboo. There she carefully looked over the stock and selected some narrow strips of rattan.

"Now what in the world are those for?"

"Never mind, I will tell you later."

By common consent, they finally turned back towards the hotel. They strolled across the street, passed the unmoving Sikh and went into the lounge where, in the cool dimness, they listened to the music and ordered their drinks. Cooper watched Tongchai as she talked; he felt he could never see enough of her wide eyes, glossy black hair and the smooth sheen of her arms.

"Why are you staring at me like that?" she asked, looking at him out of the corner of her eye.

"Because I like to," he said, happily. With one slim finger she lightly caressed his hand until he felt his breath growing short.

"If you keep on doing that I shall grab you, right here in public," he said, smiling.

After they had finished their drink they walked across the lobby and the lift took them upstairs. In his room, Cooper closed the door and the two of them were wrapped in tight embrace.

"No . . . no . . ." she finally whispered. "We must sit down . . ."

They walked over to the settee, where he flicked on the table lamp. Through the windows the hiss and explosion of an occasional rocket could be heard.

Cooper prepared drinks and brought them over to the coffee table. Tongchai was sitting on the divan, her legs pulled up under her, and her fingers busily working with the strips of rattan.

"Tongchai . . ." he said softly, sitting down beside her.

"No . . . you must wait . . . I am busy," and she looked up at him with a flashing smile. He reached over and turned the radio on low. Several times he tentatively put his arm around her but she pulled away. He watched the lovely little creature with her odd obsession about the rattan strips.

"Please . . ." she said when he again put his hand around her waist.

He smiled and sat back, sipping his drink.

Finally she was finished. Then she turned to him, a smile on her lips. "Here," she said, "for you . . . it is a present. For the cigarettes . . ."

He took the little case of woven strips in his hand. "It's beautiful. You're very skilful, Tongchai . . ."

"Always you give me things," she said. "I cannot give you anything. But I want to . . ."

He put his arms around her. This time she did not resist. "Let me do the giving, Tongchai . . . I love you," he said and his body curved around hers in aching desire. "Tongchai," he whispered and her answer was lost in the din of the jubilant fair thronging beneath the window.

Peggy Patterson watched Cooper close the door of her hotel room and then she tamped out her cigarette. This was for the birds, she told herself. Last year at this time she had met that young pilot from Pan Am.

She changed into her new Madras dress and sprayed herself generously with Chanel. Kicking off the rattan slippers she worked her feet into sandals made of twisted leather straps. They were tight but that didn't matter. She didn't intend to walk very far.

Downstairs, at the hotel entrance, the tall Sikh reached over to open the door for her and she caught a glimpse of his fingers on the handle . . . long, dark and powerful . . . and it gave her a kind of sensuous pleasure just looking at them. She stood at the top of the stairs for a moment as the night breeze moulded her dress to her plump figure. For a moment she imagined herself as Marlene Dietrich in one of those oriental pictures on the late late TV; she almost wished she was wearing a black feather boa. Then she crossed the street into the park.

In a few moments she was part of the dense crowd that ebbed about her in the darkness. She walked along looking for a Coca-Cola stand, which she finally located next to the Chinese theatre. She stood there, sipping the lukewarm drink through a straw, trying not to hear the infernal din and clashing cymbals.

The Coke finished, she wandered on through the fair, stopping at a Japanese silk stall and fingering the purple and red brocades. As she passed a tall, cylindrical wooden structure held in place by guy wires and identified as the "Death-Defying Motorcycle Drome," she glimpsed two men emerging. In spite of the darkness she could see they were Caucasians.

Continuing her stroll she knew they had stopped to watch her. Then the taller of the two detached himself from his companion and slowly followed her along the path. When he caught up she noticed from the corner of her eye his broad-planed features. He is good-looking, she thought. Very.

"Hi," he said, tentatively.

She glanced at him. "Hi," she replied, polite but aloof.

"Kind of risky walkin' around here alone, don't you think?" he asked in a Southern drawl.

"I can take care of myself," she replied archly and kept on walking. He fell into step beside her. She liked the way he moved, with the lithe steps of a boxer. She tried to figure out where he was from.

"Haven't ah seen you around here before?" he asked, politely.

She was sure he belonged to the military. "Maybe. I don't recall."

"Ever been to the American Embassy?" he asked.

She was glad he had mentioned the Embassy because she had intended to imply that she was with the Embassy herself.

"I go there occasionally," she said lightly.

"Ah'm leavin' Thailand next week. This is mah last weekend in this crazy place. Ah'll sure be glad to get away."

"Where is your home?"

"South Carolina."

"I'm sure you miss it."

"Look," he said, "how about you and me havin' a little drink or somethin' to celebrate mah last weekend?"

She hesitated a moment. "It's very late . . ."

"The Chakri bar is open. It's across the street. How about it? By the way, mah name is Milo but everybody calls me 'Sandy.'"

She stopped and looked at him. After all, he was an American and she was tired of the goddamned gramophone records. One drink. It would be easy to get rid of him, if she wanted to, at the Chakri.

She smiled. "Well, maybe just one . . . to your farewell . . ."

"You just wait here one li'l minute while ah tell mah buddy." He dashed back and she realised that his companion had evidently been following along behind them. In a moment he had returned and, taking her arm, he led her across the boulevard.

They found a table near the door of the lounge. In the half-light she saw Sandy had tight, curly blond hair and tanned features. His heavily lidded, odalisque eyes somehow made her breath come more quickly. She hadn't realised, out in the park, that he was quite so handsome. She estimated that he was about twenty-four or -five and that pleased her. She couldn't stand kids after that weekend at Bang San.

After a few moments of conversation, Sandy said, "You haven't told me about yourself, Peggy."

In the background the music was soft and sweet. She recognised the melody . . . "Serenade in the Night" . . .

"I'm a secretary," she said.

"You work for the American Government?"

She nodded but said nothing more, enjoying the mystery.

He was leaving in a few days and she had decided that it was enough for him to remember that on his last weekend in Bangkok he had met a beautiful, mysterious girl.

He drained his drink while they talked about the heat, the new film at the Chalerm Thai. Peggy finished her whiskey sour and then he appeared embarrassed. "Ah think we ought to have another one," he said, "but, well, ah had quite a big night and . . ."

She smiled at him. "I understand," she said. "I insist that you let me get the next one."

"You see, Peggy, ah don't get too much money . . . and Bangkok is a pretty lively place. But you must know all about that. Do you live around here?"

She smiled archly. "I live here."

His eyes opened wider. "You live in *this* place?" The tone of his voice was flattering beyond bearing. The waiter was

standing at the table and with a flourish she signed the chit for the drinks.

In the glow of the second whiskey sour she saw herself more clearly than ever as an enticing woman of the night, in this beautiful lounge, with the soft music, the perfume and the handsome young man opposite.

They talked about the homesickness of Americans in foreign lands, their loneliness and the trials that people like themselves underwent in these oriental countries. Another round of drinks was ordered, with Peggy again grandly signing the chit. Then the bar began to show signs of closing.

"This sure has been a wonderful evenin' for me," said Sandy. "Ah was sure lucky to run into someone like you," and he reached his hand across the table and covered hers with his strong fingers. "Ah hate to see it end, but ah suppose it's got to."

As they rose he said, gallantly, "May ah see you to your room, Miss Peggy?"

She stumbled slightly and he took her arm while they crossed the threshold of the lounge. Her shoes were beginning to hurt a little. Together they walked through the lobby and ascended to the second floor where they strolled slowly towards

212.

"Well, I'll say goodnight," she said sweetly in front of her door and extended her hand.

"Allow me," he said with elaborate politeness, nodding towards the door. The spell was momentarily broken as she searched in her handbag for the key. Finally she handed it to him and he unlocked the door.

In the room she started to say "Goodnight" again, when he stepped in beside her and swept her up in his arms, his foot pushing the door shut. Then together they walked over to the settee. There was no need for lights with the reflected glare of the fair. Wordlessly she indicated the bottle to him and he poured out two drinks. The ice had melted and he used the water in the waxed-paper bucket.

"Mighty hot," he said, as he sprawled on the divan, glass in hand.

"Make yourself comfortable," she said and when she had put her handbag on the dresser and came back to the settee he had stripped off his shirt revealing his tanned chest and the sweep of his husky, concave torso. She reached for her drink and he gently pulled her down on his lap. She felt his male warmth and nearness as their teeth grated in a fierce kiss.

The sun was shining brightly through the windows of 212 when Peggy awakened and it took her a moment before she realised where she was. Slowly she turned her head. Beside her in the bed was the lithe figure of the sleeping Sandy, naked except for the sheet pulled across his middle. One hand was stretched possessively towards her and his powerful, well-built body, even in sleep, excited her. A bead chain around his neck had two identification tags suspended from it in tangled confusion. Between them was the glitter of gold. Lightly she leaned over and touched the shining object. It was a wedding ring.

Quietly she slipped out of bed and went into the bathroom. Emerging in a housecoat and rattan slippers, she glanced at the clock and saw that it was almost ten. She went over to the almost empty bottle and poured herself a drink, mixing it with the last of the stale water. Just as she raised the glass to her lips there was a knock on the door and her heart began to pound.

"Who is it?" she asked, and a male voice replied, "Is Sandy in there?"

She caught her breath. "Who is it?"

The visitor was annoyed. "I'm his buddy. I know he's there. I wanna talk to him for a minute."

She hesitated and then opened the door. A short, stocky young man stood in the doorway. She recognised him as one of the new enlisted men in the Adjutant's office of MAAG!

"Good morning, Miss Patterson," he said, nonchalantly,

and then walked over to the bed and grabbed the sleeping figure by the ankle. "Hey, Sarge, come on! Wake up! We've got things to do!"

Slowly Sandy turned his head and finally his eyes opened and he sat up, yawning. He looked around for a moment before he saw Peggy.

"Hi," he said, smiling sleepily.

In a voice that didn't sound like her own, she answered with a feeble "Hi." The man had called him "Sarge" and she realised that he probably was also from MAAG.

"Look," said Sandy, to the young man, "Ah'll meet you down by the Coke stand at the fair in fifteen minutes. Okay?"

"You be sure and be there!"

"Ah'll be there. Don't worry!"

The young man went out and shut the door, and Sandy sat up in bed, looking at her. "How do you feel, honey?"

She winced at the endearment. Her head seemed to be spinning.

"Ah'm groggy," he said and stepped out of bed and went into the bathroom while Peggy tried to figure out how this had all come about.

When he came back, his hair was wet and he had wrapped a towel around his middle. Then he dressed, slowly and carefully, and, pouring out the last of the whiskey in a glass, sat down to tie his bootlaces.

"Boy, what a time we had last night," he said, stopping to take a drink. When she didn't reply he said, "Well, it's fun to play house once in a while. Everybody needs to have a fling at it. No harm done."

"Who are you?" she finally managed to ask.

"Ah'm Sergeant Davies of MAAG," he said pleasantly.

"I saw you have a wedding ring on your dog tags. Are you married?"

He studied his glass with a boyish grimace. "Ah guess you might say ah am."

Peggy tried to swallow some of her drink and then she set

the glass down with a trembling hand. "You'll be seeing your wife again soon?"

He glanced at his watch. "In about two hours."

"But you said last night you were going home . . ."

"Ah said ah was goin' home and that's the truth. Ah'm bein' sent to Clark Air Force Base in the Philippines. Me and mah family. But ah don't want to go. Ah like it here in Bangkok."

"I don't understand," said Peggy, trying to keep her voice even. "You didn't say anything about being married last night, or about being in MAAG . . ."

"And you didn't say nothin' about being General Mason's secretary either . . ." he laughed. "Ah figgured we were both playin' a game . . ."

She thought she was going to faint.

"General Mason is sendin' me to Clark because ah got five kids. But ah don't want to go way back there. And if he don't change his mind and leave me right here, ah'm goin' to raise hell about the whole thing. No tellin' what ah'll do. Ah won't stop at nothin' to keep from goin' back to that goddamned Philippines. Ah'm countin' on you to help me, Peggy."

He looked at her steadily. She carefully picked up her glass from the coffee table. The loudspeakers at the fair were beginning to blare again. She felt that at any moment the room would start to spin around.

23

It was late afternoon and the guards at the entrance to Government House were covertly watching for their relief as they rigidly paced back and forth in front of the Venetian-Gothic palace. Dark glasses protected their eyes from the reflection of the sun on the white marble. The crunch of their measured tread on the gravelled drive could be heard in the office of the Prime Minister.

It had originally been the library of the palace and was panelled in walnut with deeply recessed bays framing traceried windows. The ceiling was groined and several huge oil paintings of the fighting elephants of King Rama I decorated the walls. The small man with the delicate hands and penetrating black eyes sat at his desk, eyeing the silver-embossed engagement book. He noted that he and his wife were scheduled to attend a dinner at the American Ambassador's house that night to meet two U.S. senators on an inspection tour of the MAAGs.

He closed the engagement book and turned back to the pile of proofs of a new volume which the local press was readying for publication. It was the story of his life, written by a clever young Thai who worked for General Kawee in the propaganda office. The Prime Minister skimmed through it with the practised eye of a politician. It was well written and, of course, followed the coup-party line. He had reached the chapter covering World War II and the years that followed. After a few moments, he put the proofs back on the desk, recalling the old Chinese proverb, so bitter and so true, "He who tells too much of the truth shall surely hang."

No chance of that, he thought, sitting back in his carved chair, recalling the events which, in the book, were so smoothly glossed over.

He remembered the morning in December 1942 when the American fleet was destroyed at Pearl Harbour. He had been on tour in the eastern provinces of Siam and that evening attended a party in his honour at the house of the Commander of the Eastern Forces. All discussion concerned the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour earlier in the day. The audacity and crushing success of the attack itself was hard enough to believe, but even more incredible was the rumour that the Japanese were heading towards the West Coast of the United States itself.

It had been about four o'clock in the morning when he was awakened by frantic pounding on his bedroom door and told

that, since ten-thirty the previous evening, the Deputy Prime Minister in Bangkok had been trying to reach him with the news that the Japanese Ambassador had appeared in his office to request that Japanese troops be allowed to pass through Siam on their way southward into British Malaya. The Deputy had been given three and a half hours to make up his mind or the Japanese would invade Siam. When, at two o'clock in the morning the time limit expired, Japanese troops had invaded the country, landing at the resort town of Bang Poo in southern Siam and crossing the Mekong River along the Indo-Chinese border.

The Prime Minister could remember the agonising moments when he had stood with the humming telephone receiver in his hand while the Deputy waited at the other end to hear the decision. In his role of Commander-in-Chief, as a graduate of France's famed St. Cyr, his first reaction had been to fight. But even while he was announcing his decision to fly back to Lopburi, a small town north of Bangkok where the military headquarters were located, he knew that it was hopeless for the tiny, outmoded Siamese Army to defy the Japanese who that morning had sunk the American fleet. And so, after hearing the Deputy's agonised plea to reconsider, he had let himself be talked into flying directly to Bangkok.

He remembered the long flight in the darkness over the jungles of eastern Siam. He remembered seating himself at the head of the conference table, haggard from lack of sleep and from the enormity of the situation. The Japanese Ambassador, his round face sleek with the insolence of victory, was seated opposite him, flanked by several Japanese generals, their hands on their swords. But the sight of those smug generals had done something to the Prime Minister; two thousand years of freedom suddenly loomed behind the slender figure and he had smiled with the innate contempt of the sophisticate for the bully and coolly asked for time to consider.

What the Japanese did not know was that at the very moment he smiled at them a message from British head-

quarters in Singapore lay under his thin, bronze hand, informing him that all previous promises of help were no longer possible. The British themselves were under attack and powerless to assist. The cable advised him that he was, from that time on, "on his own."

The Japanese Ambassador restated his proposal. First, Japanese troops must be allowed to march through Siam southwards into British territory. Second, Siam would be expected to co-operate actively with the Japanese in various war projects and, third, Siam would be offered a proposal to join the Axis.

The Japanese Ambassador sat back, his hands folded on the marble table. He could afford to be polite, but he made it clear his patience was being strained. Across from him, backed by his Cabinet, sat the Prime Minister, equally polite, equally imperturbable, playing a desperate game with absolutely no cards in his hand. No Siamese voice, he knew, would be raised except his own. Then, with the vision of Pearl Harbour in flames and the British colossus beset on all sides and tottering, he announced his decision.

In an even, genial voice he said that, after consideration, his country agreed to the passage of Japanese troops. The Cabinet would be pleased to consider the other two proposals in full session.

Orders were immediately sent out to Siamese troops to cease resistance to the Japanese at all points of contact.

The Prime Minister sighed as he surveyed the beautiful room. How easy, years afterwards, to say what should or could have been done. But at that moment, he reflected with a touch of pride, entirely on his own—one man suddenly suspended in time and space—he had made the decision which, twenty years later, had turned out to be correct.

A knock on the door was followed by the entrance of General Kawee. The Prime Minister watched Kawee approach the desk and reflected how ironic it was that Kawee, a guerrilla leader in the northern Siamese jungles during World

War II, should now be the trusted adviser of the man once branded as the Quisling of Siam.

General Kawee had a paper in his hand. "Tonight, sir," he said, "you and your wife are scheduled for dinner at Mad Mike's. Cocktails at seven. You will meet two American Senators; one of them is a woman. They are inspecting MAAG."

"Inspecting MAAG?"

Kawee shrugged. "I can't find out whether it's a junket or whether there's something serious going on. Probably a junket."

"How about the Mason-White business? Could news have reached Washington?"

Kawee smiled. "I'm not sure how far the feud has gone. It seems to be over. The flags are flying again."

The Prime Minister remained impassive.

"Well," continued Kawee, "at least the situation is better now than it was before Mason got here. The General isn't playing White's game at all. His transfer of high-ranking advisers to army posts up-country is proof of that. But what about his remark the other day about taking tanks and artillery out of Bangkok? Suppose he brings up the subject again?"

"Until we get the small howitzers there will be no further talk about moving guns. And with the road situation as bad as it is, how can we move the tanks?"

Kawee nodded. "But I didn't know what to say when Commander Enright brought up the subject of the Marines at the Joint Council."

The Prime Minister frowned. "Why didn't the Navy tell me that the subject would come up? Didn't anybody know what Enright was going to talk about?"

Kawee shook his head. "I understand it was General Mason who wanted the subject introduced. He thought you didn't know about it!"

They laughed and the Prime Minister said, "Field Marshal Chit had forgotten about the Marines. It took me an hour to pacify him. But the big problem now is the joint manoeuvre.

Wicharn is furious. He says he won't have anything to do with it."

"He's just mad at White," said Kawee. "I understand he hasn't been to White's Sunday brunch for three weeks. I think he finally realises that White is no longer in the MAAG picture."

"I am worried. I hope he doesn't try to pull anything. He's hot-headed. And sometimes stupid," added the Prime Minister. "By the way," he continued, "where are the Air Force infantry troops?"

"The battalion left the training area yesterday," said Kawee thoughtfully, "but they haven't arrived at Air Force headquarters yet. I can't locate them. It would be best tonight that you take a full guard with you. In fact, I have already alerted them."

"I don't like to take a guard to the American Ambassador's house . . ."

Kawee shrugged. "Mad Mike will understand. The Americans have a proverb . . . 'Better safe than sorry.'"

The Prime Minister reached for the papers Kawee was holding. "These are the senators' backgrounds," said Kawee. The Prime Minister slipped the file into his briefcase.

It was a warm afternoon. After cranking down the bullet-proof windows of his Mercedes he relaxed, his right hip touching the 45-calibre automatic thrust into the upholstery. Due to an unfortunate incident several years before, the Prime Minister made it a habit not to lower the bullet-proof glass pane between himself and the chauffeur.

The car passed along the green vistas of Lumpini Park, reminding him of the proofs on his desk. The Japanese hadn't marched straight through Siam. Small parties did move southwards through the jungles of Malaya eventually to surprise the defenders of Singapore but the bulk of the Japanese troops simply remained in Bangkok taking over the beautiful Lumpini Park as a bivouac area and scandalising the Thais by bathing naked in the klong surrounding it.

He had despised the Japanese and, with grim satisfaction, reflected that they hated him in turn. Siam, at least on paper, had become a member of the Axis. At Japanese insistence, she had signed an offensive-defensive pact and declared war on Britain and the United States.

As his car turned from the Park down the street past the British Embassy he recalled how implacable the British had been in their pursuit of the war. But the Americans! The incredible Americans, who refused to accept the Siamese declaration of war, announcing that it had been made under duress and would be ignored!

He lit a cigarette and settled back in his seat, reminiscing about the days when his working dress included riding boots and a uniform. And his followers had evolved a new greeting for all Thais to use, modelled after the "Heil Hitler" of Germany and prostituting the beautiful "Suwadi" into something so ridiculous that it was quite unenforceable outside military and government circles.

He smiled, remembering his wife's pride at being the only woman officer in the Thai Army—a colonel in the nursing corps—in a specially designed uniform worn with such swagger.

His countrymen! He had tried so long to rouse them from their easygoing attitude, to sharpen them, teach them to understand hard work so they might survive in the modern world. And how impossible it had been! He remembered the decree he had issued that all Thai officials should undertake daily physical training, including route marches and rudiments of military drill. His purpose had been to shake the desk-bound bureaucracy loose from its monarchical stupor. And how the newspapers had raised a gleeful cry when, through the same bureaucratic stupidity, fifty-year-old women clerks had been observed marching on the highways!

His greatest hope had become his greatest failure—the military base up-country where he had planned to secretly concentrate enough army personnel to resist the Japanese. But

his engineers had minimised the hazards of malaria in the area and, after an appalling surge in the death rate among the workmen, his political enemies had revealed his plans to the Japanese and he had been turned out of office.

Then, with the final victory of the Allies and the shrill claims of the up-country guerrillas for vengeance, he had been thrown in jail as a war criminal and sentenced to death.

But because, after all, they were Thais, and because of all the behind-the-scenes pressure from various groups who had, at one time or another, benefited from his years in office, the court had ruled that he could not be tried for crimes which were not so defined when they were performed. He had been released.

The Prime Minister tapped out his cigarette as the car approached the driveway to his house.

What had gone wrong? Instead of becoming smarter, the Thais had become merely clever. Instead of working harder, they had learned how to exact more money for the same amount of work. He suspected that the real reason was the Japanese. During the years of wartime dealings with that Spartan people, the subtle Thais had sharpened their wits. It became a game to outwit the Japanese, but it was a corrupting one; his people had passed from childhood to cynical middle age with no maturity at all.

He looked up to see that the car had halted in front of the door of his house.

24

Captain Cooper had his driver park the Vauxhall on the street outside the Ambassador's house. When he recognised General Mason's limousine passing, he directed his chauffeur to follow it.

The Ambassador's house was a large, old-fashioned wooden building set in a parklike expanse dotted with clumps of bougainvillea and wild orchid trees. The entire first floor was an open loggia and the Ambassador and his wife were waiting

at the entrance to greet the General and Mrs. Mason.

The two Senators had already arrived. Blake was a tall, slender Midwesterner with tow hair and big square teeth. He was considered by his party to be a candidate for the presidency and was well-known in military and financial circles in Washington. Mrs. Hamilton, the other Senator, was a plump, middle-aged woman with iron-grey hair and slightly oversized features, smartly dressed in black and wearing diamonds. Cocktails had been served and in about fifteen minutes the butler announced the appearance of the Prime Minister's car.

The Ambassador and Mrs. Murphy moved towards the door. Since Lieutenant Halloran was busy with the drinks, Cooper accompanied them to the entrance. A green Mercedes was circling the driveway, preceded by a jeep carrying five uniformed military police. The jeep, continuing past the portico, stopped in the darkness beyond, where its occupants dismounted. Carrying automatic weapons at high port, they double-timed across the lawn to disperse themselves in the various clumps of shrubbery.

When the limousine had stopped, Cooper opened the rear door. Lady Titana in a Balmain gown with an emerald necklace and tiara emerged, followed by the Prime Minister. Cooper, holding the door open, observed an unsheathed pistol tucked in each corner of the back seat. The Prime Minister caught his glance and winked as he brushed past him.

Back in the loggia, Cooper noted that the military police officer was standing in the shadow of a jacaranda tree, his white helmet and belt visible in the darkness. He stood quietly surveying the party. From time to time he casually shifted his position so he might keep the Prime Minister in view.

They dined in a small, beautifully appointed salon on china bearing the seal of the United States. During dinner Cooper noticed that the police officer had moved and was now stationed outside the dining-room window, still watching the Prime Minister while the white-haired man laughed and chatted with the other guests.

"I understand, sir," said Senator Blake, "that you have had a long career both as an Army officer and as a statesman."

The Prime Minister nodded.

"I myself," said Blake, "have spent just about all my adult life in government, in one capacity or another."

"Then," said the Prime Minister, "I'm sure you subscribe to the wise words of your Abraham Lincoln who said that government is not always the choice between good and evil but rather between the lesser of two evils . . . which is something that can only be learned after much experience."

The Senator laughed. "When he said government was an act of compromise, he knew what he was talking about!"

"Of course," continued the Prime Minister, "we Thais have a reputation for being—what is the word—adept at the art of compromise. Sometimes more unkind words are used. But it is so easy to know, after it is all over, what should have been done . . ."

Senator Blake nodded. "I often find myself doing some Monday-morning quarterbacking, especially for my opponents!"

They laughed and the Prime Minister asked, "Monday-morning quarterbacking?"

General Mason broke in, "It is a football term, Excellency. It means that on Monday morning, following the Saturday game, every spectator knows what the quarterback should have done."

Ambassador Murphy added, "It is a critique of all the 'horseback decisions' that have to be made in the day's work."

The Prime Minister's eyes twinkled. "Sometimes one must make a 'horseback decision' even in the middle of a river . . ." and he looked at Ambassador Murphy, who nodded in understanding.

When the meal was over, liqueurs were served in the loggia.

"You have a lovely place," said Mrs. Hamilton while they sat in the cool night air, heavy with the scent of mali.

"We enjoy it very much," said Mrs. Murphy.

"Does that canal ever overflow in the rainy season?" asked Senator Blake, waving his glass towards the klong, the water of which was even with the grassy edge.

"Occasionally," said Ambassador Murphy. "I understand there was a big flood in Bangkok some years ago . . ."

"In 1939," said the Prime Minister. "It lasted for several weeks. We had to declare martial law to insure the safety of drinking water."

"That was before we had the Department of Health," added Lady Titana. "That has been one of the improvements which was very difficult to organise. The people simply did not understand it."

Lieutenant Halloran broke in. "This house, Senator, became very famous during the flood as an adjunct to the zoo!"

"What he's saying, Senator," interjected the Ambassador, "is that when the flood subsided, the largest python ever seen in this country was found right where you're sitting now. I believe it was some twenty-seven feet long."

The Senator involuntarily squirmed and the ladies politely shuddered. "Are there many snakes in Thailand?" asked Mrs. Hamilton.

"Occasionally we find them, even here in Bangkok. All the water, you know," said the Ambassador. "Which reminds me of a real good story . . ."

"Mike!" said his wife with an admonitory glance.

"I'm sure everyone here can appreciate it," said the Ambassador. "It involved one of our military attachés. He and his wife were relaxing on their lawn with a few guests one afternoon when a small cobra showed up in the grass. I might add that the party was informal and the Colonel was wearing a pair of those Chinese pants . . . you know, the wide silk job that's worn without a belt, simply tucked in around the waist. When the snake appeared, all the ladies jumped up on chairs and the Colonel, in accepted military fashion, grabbed a stick and went after it. Well, with all the activity, the pants started to fall down and the Colonel was having quite a job holding

them up with one hand and flailing away with the other when his wife—and I'm sure the story is apocryphal—is supposed to have cried out, 'To hell with the pants, John, get the snake!' ”

The party laughed as Mrs. Murphy turned to the ladies with a smile and a helpless shrug.

After about a half-hour, the Prime Minister rose and announced that he and Lady Titana must leave.

When they had gone, Mrs. Hamilton and the ladies remained in the loggia while the Ambassador and his male guests went upstairs to his study, a book-lined room furnished with leather chairs and a large desk. Cigars and brandy were on the coffee table.

“Well, Mike,” said Senator Blake, settling in a chair and lighting a cigar, “Margaret Hamilton and I have enjoyed our trip so far. I think Bangkok will turn out to be the most interestin’ stop of all. I like Thailand . . . or is it Siam? Just what is the name of this country, anyway?”

“The original English translation was ‘Siam,’” said the Ambassador. “During World War II, in a burst of patriotism, the Prime Minister changed it to Thailand, because the people here are ‘Thais’ and the word means ‘free.’ It was probably done during one of his campaigns to annoy the Japs who were here as so-called ‘guests.’ Then, when the war was over they changed back to ‘Siam.’ When the Prime Minister reassumed power he reverted to ‘Thailand.’ Everybody went along with ‘Thailand’ except the British who had originally named it.”

“I suppose you read Elsie Webster’s article on Thailand a while back?” asked Senator Blake.

The Ambassador nodded.

“What did you people out here think of it?”

The Ambassador put down his glass. “Senator, my boys in the Information Service have a little game they play whenever a correspondent shows up in Bangkok, stays three days and then writes the inside story of Thailand. They claim they can

tell at what hotel he stayed, and at what bar he hung out. If he is booked into the Oriental, they can recognise the Bamboo Bar slant. If he talks with Mr. Blair at the Chakri, they can recognise old Blair's arguments and the story is invariably anti-British. The Trocadero Bar, on the other hand, will give him a more international slant. The Princess Cocktail Lounge is strictly American.

"Now Elsie was smarter than most. She went to all of them. She also spent time with General Kawee, the propaganda chief of the party now in power in the country. There were pictures of her talking to the Prime Minister and even a colour shot of her with the King. Elsie really got around!"

"How about the 'man on the street'?" asked the Senator.

"Oh, yes. Elsie got him in the act too. Miss Webster doesn't speak a word of Thai and the 'man on the street' couldn't care less about politics even if he knew what really went on, so how she ever managed to detect in his eyes the 'vague, universal hunger for dignity and status' I leave to your imagination."

Senator Blake flicked the ash from his cigar. "According to the press," he said, "we always manage to pick the wrong parties to back in the countries we try to help. We're accused of teaming up with reactionaries and then, when democracy raises its head, we're backin' the losers!"

"But there's something to be said for our side, too," said the Ambassador. "What else can we do but deal with the government in power? If we don't particularly like it, what's the alternative? Insist that it be changed to something we like? Give them six months to produce a Declaration of Independence, a Constitution and an Abraham Lincoln?"

"So we do the best we can . . . try to sell them our way of doing things. Does anybody really believe that Madison Avenue, which can appeal to everything from mother love to underarm odour to peddle goods, couldn't whip up some argument to sell the American way? I maintain we've done our best. But some things just can't be sold . . . they have to be wanted.

"I'm not attacking the press," he continued, "but there are a few of these journalists who wander around the world and, without knowing the complete picture—because there *are* a few things they can't be told—decide in their own minds exactly what's being done right and what's being done wrong. This mother-in-law routine—all gab and no responsibility—earns them the title of 'pundit.'

"Elsie Webster is my case in point. The girl-wonder of journalism showed up looking for something really spectacular—something that nobody from the President on down had ever thought of until smart little Elsie wandered along. It's a gimmick. And it sells. It can also help us lose the whole damned world, and if it does, we'll deserve to. In her case, it was Pridi. She made him the unsung hero; a combination of Juarez and Bolivar, defeated by the reactionaries led by the present Prime Minister."

Blake sat back, watching the smoke rings curl from his cigar. "You sound as though Elsie panned your organisation, Mike. Actually she praised it!"

The Ambassador smiled a tired smile. "We lucked out. It could just as easily have been the other way around because she praised us for the wrong reasons."

They sat back in their chairs—Mad Mike, the American legend who could afford to speak as he chose, and the tow-headed Senator, already in the shadow of the most awesome office on earth.

"What about this Pridi?" asked the Senator. "Was everything she said true?"

The Ambassador poured himself another brandy. "Back in the thirties, Pridi was responsible, along with a few others, for deposing the last absolute ruler in the world. The Thai people themselves didn't rise up against the king; it was a handful of men, under this man's leadership. The Siamese monarchy was slow and incompetent and debt-ridden, but it was benevolent. In other words, it was Thai . . . with plenty of 'Mai Ben Rai,' which means 'never mind.'

"When Prajadapok was offered a constitutional monarchy with himself as a figurehead, he refused. Pridi never did want him anyway. He wanted a republic. On the other hand, Pridi was no Moses leading the Chosen People out of bondage either, as Miss Webster would have it. He was more like Savonarola. Some of his proposed reforms make the Communists look like Union Leaguers. So it wasn't too difficult for the more conservative type to take over, like the present Prime Minister, backed by the Army.

"The man you talked with tonight was the one who made the revolution work. His people finally cleaned out much of the old-line royalty with their expensive prerogatives along with some of the wildest of the reformers. A constitutional monarchy was established with a relative of Prajadapok's as king. Remember, during this time there were no barricades in the streets. It was all done in a series of relatively bloodless coups and manoeuvres for power—and ended up with the Prime Minister as top man."

Senator Blake twirled his cigar in his fingers. "I had no idea, before I met him, that the Prime Minister was such a man of the world. I expected somebody a lot different. He's what you mean, I suppose, when you talk about the 'subtle Thais.'"

The Ambassador nodded.

"Of course, I can't quite square all this with his turnin' the country over to the Japs . . ."

General Mason stirred in his chair. "It was the day after Pearl Harbour," he said, "and all he had was a tiny army that had never fought a modern war—against Japan who the day before had taken on the United States."

The Senator nodded.

"So he did what any reasonable commander would do," continued General Mason. "He acquiesced. Gave them permission to move through Siam. The fact that they stayed on like the 'Man Who Came to Dinner' wasn't in his calculations, I'm sure."

The Senator studied his glass. The General continued.

"They finally ended up declaring war on England and us. And, you will recall, we didn't accept it. Said it was made under duress."

"I like that gesture."

"It paid off for us too, Senator. When we needed sanctuary for downed pilots and bases for other activities in this part of the world, we were taken care of in northern Thailand. Incidentally, one of the guerrilla leaders was General Kawee, now the propaganda chief.

"The up-country people like Kawee were in communication with the Army here in Bangkok by radio. This set-up functioned during the war. Whenever the Japs wanted to interrogate captured Allied prisoners, the Prime Minister insisted that they remain in Thai hands, which meant they were spared the kind of handling that other prisoners underwent."

"But he was tried as a war criminal . . ."

"He was," interjected the Ambassador, "but the Thai courts released him. Then, when the Liberals got back into power after the war, it appeared they couldn't run things any better than before. One day the young King was found with a bullet in his head. His death was never satisfactorily explained, and finally the Army managed to manoeuvre the Prime Minister back into power again as the only man who could get things done and keep peace between rival groups."

"What did he mean about the 'midstream decision'?" asked the Senator, "or was it a private joke?"

The Ambassador laughed and General Mason explained. "In 1951 the U.S. was giving the Thais a dredge. Down at the Royal Landing on the Chayo Pya River, with all the diplomatic corps present, a boat pulled up beside the speaker's platform and the Prime Minister found himself surrounded by Thai Marines with machine pistols. Evidently the Navy had decided that they would like to run things for a while. As cool and calm as ever, he turned to the spectators and said, 'Please don't do anything. Perhaps it's better this way,' and they led him off to the boat as a prisoner."

The Senator smiled. "It's apparent he got out of that one. How?"

"A few days later," continued the General, "the Air Force attacked the ship and sank it and he had to jump into the river to save his life. He swam out to the middle and then, with the Army on one shore and the Navy on the other, he had to decide which one was more likely to win out. He gambled on the Army and swam their way. He guessed right."

The Senator tamped out his cigar. "A fabulous man. Wish I'd known all this durin' dinner."

The three men laughed and Cooper, looking at them at ease in the leather chairs, realised that the man they had been discussing, who could wink at the pistols in his limousine, was of the same breed.

The Ambassador put out his cigar and, reaching over to the desk, picked up a sheet of paper. "Here's the schedule of your visit, Senator," he said, reading off the items. "Tomorrow you'll be under MAAG auspices. In the morning you have a tour of the city, and in the afternoon a briefing. Your guide for the morning tour will be furnished by the Ministry of the Interior . . . a . . . Miss Tongchai Thanom . . ."

General Mason glanced at Cooper when the Ambassador mentioned Tongchai's name.

"Perhaps we should join the ladies," said Mad Mike.

25

At nine o'clock the next morning, General and Mrs. Mason and Cooper arrived at the Oriental Hotel and were directed to the Congressional party suite. The shabby grandeur of the living room was pitilessly exposed by the morning sun—the heavy, worn rug, the pier mirror framed with gilded cupids, the glass blue and discoloured with age.

Senator Blake was waiting for them in a freshly pressed grey silk suit, his shock of hair carefully combed.

"Mighty nice of you folks to come all the way out here this mornin'," he said, after greeting them. "And I don't want to take you away from your duties, General, for a sightseein' trip!"

"As a matter of fact, Senator," said the General, "I won't be able to go along. But my wife and my aide will accompany you. I'll expect you at my house for lunch."

The other members of the party filed in, Mrs. Hamilton in a light-blue dress with a large handbag. The three administrative assistants followed.

"We'd like to have all of you for lunch today," said Mrs. Mason. "Our home is not far from the MAAG office." The invitation accepted, the party went downstairs where the General left. Mrs. Mason and the two Senators got into the General's limousine and Cooper climbed into the front seat. A station wagon had been provided for the balance of the party.

It was a warm ride down teeming New Road. At one point they were held up by a Chinese funeral procession moving along nonchalantly in the midst of the heavy traffic. It was led by a band of wailing fifes and clashing cymbals. The small camphorwood coffin on a bier was carried along behind them followed by the relatives, all in white, chatting gaily and exchanging felicitations with passers-by. Bringing up the rear was another litter containing what appeared to be a collection of brightly coloured cardboard playthings . . . a large house, complete with bay windows, chimneys and a porch; a Chinese summer gazebo and finally the cardboard replica of a new model Cadillac.

Mrs. Mason answered the Senator's questions on the procession, explaining that death, to the tightly knit Chinese family, is not the total severance that it is to Caucasians and therefore not the occasion for lamentation. The paper models would be burned at the cremation along with the body so that the spirit of these things could accompany the deceased for use in the next world.

"Maybe they've got a point!" said Mrs. Hamilton. "In my

procession I'd like to have a replica of the Hope diamond and a silver mink coat." Senator Blake chuckled. "In Washington," he added, dryly, "they could do a rousin' business in replicas of the White House."

Arriving at the massive walls of the old Royal Palace Mrs Mason explained that the present King no longer lived here, but occupied modern-style quarters in Dusit Park. She also added, "I understand our guide today will be a friend of Captain Cooper's. I look forward to meeting her."

The high wooden "Gate of the Glorious Precious Victory" slowly swung open for the approaching cars. Cooper saw Tongchai, in harlequin sunglasses, waiting for them.

"Good morning, Senator Hamilton and Senator Blake," she said. "I'm very glad to meet you, Mrs. Mason." Unobtrusively she and Cooper clasped hands when she got into the front seat with him. "I'm Tongchai Thanom," she said, leaning over the back of the seat to shake their hands.

The sedan rolled slowly along the driveway, past well-trimmed ilex and oleander hedges and the now silent fountains. It drew up before the Chakri Palace, a huge building of white stone, built in Renaissance style, with a double marble stairway in front. It was surmounted by a great, curved roof of crimson and green tiles with three tiered towers, at once incongruous and somehow wildly appropriate. As they dismounted, Tongchai explained that the palace had been built by King Chulalongkorn—the little prince who had been educated by Anna of *The King and I*.

Tongchai explained that although the King had imported the architect and artisans from Italy to build a European-style palace, halfway through the construction he decided that he wanted a Siamese roof on it.

They ascended the monumental Michelangelo staircase and entered the high, cool entrance hall. Stepping into the main salon, with its tessellated marble floor, the party was suddenly transported back to the Florence of the Medicis. Two rows of polished red-marble columns extended the length of the great

room, upholding a coffered ceiling painted in the tradition of Italian baroque churches except that the floating divinities were Thai. Along the walls hung life-sized paintings of the former kings of Thailand. Since oil painting was not native to Thailand, Tongchai explained that King Mongkut had assembled the oldest men in the kingdom and paraded before them various Siamese until they identified faces most nearly resembling their memories of the former monarch. These, then, became the models for the European painters.

Fragile gilt chairs were flanked by inlaid tables holding ormolu clocks and candelabra. Tongchai told them the furniture had been imported from London in the late 1800s at a cost of almost half a million dollars.

After inspecting the throne room with its ceiling of Tiffany glass, they crossed the courtyard to the old wooden Amarindr Hall where King Mongkut had held court. Here the party was transported to the fabulous Orient of ancient times. At the far end of the high, narrow hall was the boat-shaped golden throne on a marble base. Above it was a curtained alcove in which the King would appear for certain public audiences where he would sit, covered with jewels, remote and godlike.

They passed the flashing spires of temples and chedis to the holy of holies, the Temple of the Emerald Buddha, every inch of which was sheathed in a mosaic of gold, ruby, yellow and azure porcelain. The sun's rays produced a glitter almost unbearable to the naked eye.

On the covered porch they removed their shoes and stepped into the cool darkness of the temple. At the far end, on a thirty-foot gilded pyramid, sat the Emerald Buddha. Tongchai explained that it was actually made of green quartz, about two feet high and covered with shimmering gold and diamond draperies. Over it towered a pointed baldachin that concealed the fluorescent tubing illuminating the statue itself.

All around them, Thais were on their knees, their foreheads touching the floor. But mingled with reverence was the sound of talking and low laughter. In one corner an old Thai woman

pounded betel nut in a metal tube and the metallic clank echoed throughout the temple. Beside her, utterly oblivious to the din, two Buddhist monks knelt motionless in their saffron robes, their shaven heads glowing like bronze spheres in the half-light.

Excusing herself, Tongchai sank to her knees and reverently touched her forehead to the floor. Then she rose and guided them out of the shrine. Mr. Blake was moved by the gesture. "She's beautiful," he said to Mrs. Mason. "She looks like somethin' out of a fairy tale."

There was another stop on their tour; the great Wat Po, Temple of the Sleeping Buddha. Alighting from the cars, they walked into the tall, narrow temple, prompting mangy pyc dogs to slink out of their way. Inside they viewed the huge figure of the reclining Buddha. Tongchai stopped the procession to light a candle and toss a pinch of incense on the smouldering burner before the shrine.

Drawing Cooper away from the group, Mrs. Mason said, "She is really beautiful, Jim, and stop looking like a mother hen! She's doing a fine job."

Emerging into the courtyard, Tongchai led the party around the side of the building back towards the cars. As they turned the corner, Cooper managed to catch her eye. "Tongchai," he murmured, "we'd better take the other route . . ." She flashed a bright smile and continued walking in the same direction. Their path took them past a pile of laterite rocks on top of which was perched a four-foot grey limestone lingam, the only phallic symbol in Bangkok. It was slightly stylised and quite unmistakable. A woman was kneeling before it, repeatedly touching her forehead to the ground before her offering of red lotus blossoms.

Mrs. Hamilton stopped. "And what is that?" she asked Cooper who happened to be standing beside her. He reddened slightly while the party came to a halt. Although he had seen it before, it now struck him as the most lewd sight he had ever encountered. "It's a . . . a . . .," and he looked helplessly at

Mrs. Mason who, with a gleam in her eye, calmly returned his look. "It's a...*Sivalung*..." He had suddenly remembered the Indian name for it.

Tongchai moved in to the rescue. "A very famous god, Mrs. Hamilton, an old Hindu idol brought from Cambodia many years ago."

"What do you suppose that woman's praying for?" asked Mrs. Hamilton, her bright, somewhat bulging eyes surveying the scene. Cooper wanted to strangle her, especially when he heard a quiet chuckle from the men behind him.

Again Tongchai helped out. "Probably praying to her husband, or maybe a sweetheart," she said and then, observing the faces of the men she hastily corrected herself, "I mean... praying *for* a husband or..." She stopped as it occurred to her just what she was saying and a faint flush rose in her cheeks. "Perhaps we should move on," she added, with finality. "The sun seems to be getting very warm..."

The party got under way again and Cooper fell in beside her. Mrs. Mason caught them exchanging glances and smiled at them in sympathy.

26

Colonel White and Captain Cooper stood on the steps of the MAAG headquarters at two o'clock waiting for the senatorial inspection party to arrive. Cooper, skipping the Masons' luncheon, had come directly back to the headquarters to check on the briefing arrangements.

"The General is going to have to get used to these Congressional visits," said Colonel White. "We're 'in season' now and everybody in Washington wants a trip to Thailand. The best way to get it is to come out here and ask us what the hell we're doing with all that money. I don't know why Mrs. Mason took them around today. My wife could have done that, or Miss Patterson. I don't know how they find out, but every VIP knows all about the Thai Silk Shop and Abubaker's Silver

Shop." He glanced at his watch. "So naturally they're late."

"They had lunch at the General's. I hope they're not held up too long. It's a full-scale briefing . . ."

"I know that. And the General was wrong. Three-quarters of an hour is enough. Longer than that and they get restless. They don't really want to hear anything, believe me."

"Don't they ever check up on night life in Bangkok?"

"Not Congressionals. Night life is the speciality of the military visitors. These people go to bed. But Jesus, when I think of the time we waste dusting window sills and hiding 'hold' baskets!"

"Their twix said they wanted to see the team in operation—no spit and polish . . ."

The Colonel stripped his cigarette. "That's crap and you know it, Cooper," he said. "It looks good on the twix but don't forget they turn in a report when they get home. And they'll remember a broken floorboard longer than the yearly cost of the Air Force."

"I haven't been able to figure out Mrs. Hamilton," said Cooper, recalling the phallic stone in the temple.

"First time we've had a female on one of these," said White. "God help us if the women start making these junkets."

They looked up to see the General's car turning into the drive, followed by a station wagon. Cooper and White moved down the steps as the vehicles came abreast of the porch. General Mason emerged first, followed by Mrs. Hamilton, patting her grey hair into place and straightening out her dress. Cooper hastened to relieve her of the bundles she was carrying under her arm. After her came Senator Blake, blinking in the sunlight and pulling at his rumpled silk suit. He waited for the three men in the station wagon to join him.

Captain Cooper became conscious of his own trim waist and shining jump boots as he followed the party up the stairs to the General's office. Each visitor deposited his bundle on the desk before moving into the conference room.

Inside the room, an easel had been set up and classified

charts were in place. The table had been arranged with pads and pencils for the briefing. The MAAG staff was lined up, waiting to greet the visitors.

"I suppose we'd better get started," said the General after introductions. "We're running just a little late."

"That's because of the extra shopping we insisted on," said Mrs. Hamilton complacently. She laid her handbag on the table and seated herself.

Colonel White and Captain Cooper took up positions in the doorway where they could catch any telephones that rang during the briefing. Senator Blake settled back in his chair and turned around. "Anybody here from my home state?" he asked. Colonel White caught General Mason's eye and pointed down the hall where he had assembled several soldiers from the Senator's state. The General looked at him for a moment and then turned back to the Senator. "I guess not, sir." He motioned the Navy Commander to begin.

Colonel White looked at Cooper and unobtrusively made a "thumbs down" gesture with his hand.

The Commander began his briefing. "The Thai Navy consists of the ships you see on this chart, ranging in tonnage from . . ."

Chart after chart was covered in complete and relentless detail. The General sat immobile, his eyes on the speaker. The rest of his staff, although they knew every word of the briefing by heart, followed his example. They were spared nothing. Tonnages, ages of ships, armament, strength, supply, construction, medical facilities, ordnance, legal and research activities. He discussed shore establishments, dockyards, depots and training centres.

During the talk, Cooper had time to notice that Senator Blake needed a haircut. He had slumped in his seat, with his chin propped up in one hand and it was difficult to tell whether his eyes were closed or open. One by one the men in the party leaned back or shifted in their wooden chairs and Mrs. Hamilton doodled. Suddenly a loud crack startled everyone into wakefulness. The briefing was stopped until it was determined

that a bronze cigarette lighter had fallen out of Senator Blake's pocket. Cooper recovered it from under the table, noting that it was obviously a New Road purchase, and restored it to the Senator. The Commander resumed his talk.

When Commander Enright finished he asked if there were any questions. Senator Blake, his chin on his hand, said, "Just how effective would you estimate the Navy was, Commander, compared with other navies of its size and training?"

This was obviously a loaded question. "Well," the Commander countered and looked at the General. The latter, impassive as a Buddha, stared back at him. The Commander was at a loss. With Colonel White in command, it would have been a glib "90 per cent, sir," but with General Mason he wasn't sure. "It's difficult to say, sir," he continued, "but perhaps a figure of let's say 80 or 85 per cent . . ." and again he looked at the General.

"Perhaps you didn't understand the question," said the General. "At last Thursday's staff meeting we arrived at another figure."

There was a pause as the Commander stood with his pointer in his hand. He couldn't imagine what the General was trying to do—crucify him, or the Navy or the entire MAAG. He finally gave the Senator a figure.

"And how much money did we spend on 'em last year?"

The Commander swallowed and gave him the figure. Senator Blake looked at Mrs. Hamilton significantly. There was another period of silence, broken only by the sound of the punkha overhead.

"Thank you." The Senator slumped in his chair again. The General nodded to the Air Force adviser and Colonel Harper took the pointer from the now flustered Commander and began his briefing.

The room became warmer, long fingers of sunshine creeping across the floor. Insects buzzed around the fan. Members of the team fanned themselves with their briefing schedules. Mrs. Hamilton drew circles on her pad. Once, with a loud snap of

her handbag catch, which startled the somnolent visitors, she withdrew a handkerchief and patted her forehead.

At the finish of the briefing, there were a few questions and then the Senator again asked, "Just how effective would you say the Air Force is, Colonel?"

Colonel Harper immediately gave an honest figure.

"And you said that the amount on your chart, in red, is the appropriation last year?"

"Yes, sir."

Another look passed around the table. Senator Blake impatiently pulled at the collar of his shirt and Mrs. Hamilton daintily drew a finger across her upper lip.

"Perhaps we should take a break," said General Mason, noticing their discomfort. "Cooper, how about getting us some Cokes. I don't imagine any of our guests want hot coffee."

Out in the hallway Colonel White and Cooper withdrew and Miss Patterson was dispatched to bring back a dozen Cokes from the snack bar. "Just charge them to me," the Colonel muttered. "For Christ's sake, Cooper, see if you can find some glasses, or at least some straws!"

When he returned with the straws and Cokes, everyone in the conference was standing up.

Receiving her Coke, Mrs. Hamilton said, "Does your snack bar have any of those Siamese pastries we saw downtown? You know the ones with the whipped cream?"

"No," interrupted the General, overhearing her. "I'm sorry, Mrs. Hamilton, but the snack bar doesn't handle them. It's risky in the tropics."

Colonel White, overhearing them, walked out to Miss Patterson. "Peggy," he said, "get my driver to take you to New Road and get some goddamned Thai pastries with whipped cream on them. We're in hot water now. At least Mrs. Hamilton can stuff her face with whipped cream. Maybe it'll help!"

In the conference room, Mrs. Hamilton was querying the General. "What are your relations with the Thai military forces?" she asked, reseating herself.

"How do you mean that, Mrs. Hamilton?"

"Do you have frequent contacts with them, outside of business hours, I mean. Go to parties, things like that?"

"Oh, yes. The Thais are great party givers and they enjoy them."

"I notice here in your notes there's an allowance of \$300 for entertaining. What does that cover?"

Colonel White walked over by the General, trying to get his attention.

"Well," said the General, ignoring him, "that's for celebrations to which we invite Thais. Armed Forces Day, Fourth of July and plain parties."

"And the \$300?" she continued. "Is that for food or what?"

"Mostly drink."

"What kind of drink?"

Colonel White, unable to control himself, broke in. "Perhaps I can answer that," he said, with a warning glance at the General.

"Oh, that's all right, White," said Mason, turning to Mrs. Hamilton. "It's for whiskey, gin, rum, and so forth."

"For the Siamese?"

"Mostly for the Siamese. But for everyone at the party, of course."

There was a pause. "The Siamese are Buddhists and their religion forbids them to drink."

Colonel White looked at Cooper and shrugged. He had done his best.

"Mrs. Hamilton," said the General, "they may be Buddhists, but when they come to my parties, they drink!"

There was a general round of laughter. "Well, General," said Senator Blake, flicking the neck of his empty bottle with his thumb, "we're ready to continue if you are."

The final portion was given by Colonel Hawley. He was his usual careful, meticulous self and he took almost forty minutes.

No question were asked until the appearance of the financial chart. Senator Blake sat up and brushed his hair back. "I been

followin' everythin' and that green line up there has me confused. It's labelled 'additional allowances.' Now what's that? Are we payin' their salaries?"

"Sir, that refers to extra per diem paid to Thai officers and men while attending our schools back home. Their regular salaries don't go very far in the States."

"Hell, man, why can't the Prime Minister fork over a little more money?"

The General intervened. "Senator, these Thai officers stay in our billets and eat at our officers' messes back home. They need extra uniforms, travel money, tip money. It comes to a lot more than their regular pay. Since the Thai Army budget allows nothing for this item, it would automatically restrict our schooling to those who can afford to pay for extras out of their own pockets. That's the reason we help."

"I see," said the Senator. "You understand, General, I'm not questionin' your figures. It's just that the whole problem is a ticklish one. It's hard to draw the line on these things, once they start, and we just want to be sure that these good people are pullin' their weight as best they can."

"Sir, I believe they are. I do agree that there's always a temptation to slack off but I don't know just what we can do about it."

"Well, you folks just keep pluggin' away at it. And now, General, what we would like to hear about is the plan, if any, for the general defence of this country. Can you go into that?"

"I can give you the overall plan, Senator." Mason rose. Taking the pointer from the Colonel, he walked up to the wall map. "In essence," he said, "the plan involves the placing of units here and here . . ." he illustrated with the pointer, "and to take up positions along the border. Then, backed by artillery, tanks and air, they will hold fast wherever an attack might occur."

He went on to explain the potential movements of the Air Force and the Navy.

When he had finished, the Senator took out his glasses and

put them on. "General," he asked, "now how did they whip up this plan? Were your advisers in there with 'em?"

"We work very closely with all phases of armed forces activities."

"Yes. I know that. But in a case like this—something this important—how much of it is your plan and how much is theirs? Do you have some kind of a joint conference with them, or what?"

"The final plan is always their own, of course," said the General. "We are here as advisers. We work with them. Help them."

The Senator took off his glasses and tapped them on the table. "I understand that. But to get back to this particular defence you've just outlined. Who first suggested it?"

"That's hard to say, Senator," he answered, still impassive. "In joint discussions, we don't keep track of who suggests what . . ."

Mrs. Hamilton spoke up. "But you gave the final approval?"

"No, Mrs. Hamilton, the final approval is the Prime Minister's responsibility."

"Then," said Senator Blake, "it is possible that you might not approve of a plan but it could still be adopted. Is that it?"

The General nodded.

The Senator tested the point of a pencil elaborately on the scratch pad. "Was it true in this case?" he asked.

"Yes," said the General, after a pause.

"Then we've spent millions of dollars for something you don't okay?"

The military personnel in the room held their collective breath; Colonel White slipped out on to the veranda, punching his fist in the palm of his hand.

"That's right, sir," answered the General. The Congressional party exchanged looks as the General took his seat.

"What don't you like about it?" asked the Senator.

"Actually, there's nothing wrong with the plan, as such,"

said the General patiently. "It's just that some parts of it will be carried out in the jungle. That can't be done with standard equipment. You need things like knee mortars, and 75mm pack howitzers and, in certain areas, even horses. In other words, in my opinion there is need for specialised equipment. What I'm trying to say is that tanks and 155 guns and trucks won't always operate in the jungle. It's got to be something that a 120-pound man can carry or pull."

"Have you discussed this with the Thais?"

"Yes. But without too much success. Many of the younger officers have been to school in the States. They have seen our newest equipment. It's hard for them to realise that maybe some of our older and lighter items might be better under certain circumstances. When they get back home and find that we aren't sending them the things they've seen, they feel we are pushing our old stuff off on them. They hate to think of their MDAP grant being used for anything but the newest and the biggest."

The two Senators looked at each other when the General finished.

Mrs. Hamilton had another question. "Who pushes the button, General?" she asked.

"What do you mean, Mrs. Hamilton?"

"I mean, in the case of an attack, who gives the order to begin firing? Do you?"

"No. I don't. This is a sovereign nation. The Prime Minister acts for the King and gives the word."

"Then you don't have anything to do with it?"

"Not unless they ask me, as an adviser."

"Would they?"

The General smiled. "I don't know why not. In fact, I'm sure they would. But the point is that they don't have to."

The Senator put his glasses back in his pocket and drummed his fingers on the table. "To summarise, then, it appears that we've given this country a lot of equipment, addin' up to quite a sizeable sum of money, to help build up a force which, in

your estimation, is that effective," and he pointed to the figure on the last chart.

"Roughly, yes."

"Is that good?"

"Under the circumstances, very good."

"Circumstances?"

"What I mean is that the figure I've given you is a very rough estimate. As one of my officers has pointed out, when you give equipment you also must give the way of life that made that equipment possible. It takes time for a country to change its customs, which in some cases is necessary. Meantime, we do the best we can. I will say one thing. These people learn. And fast."

There was silence around the table. Visibly worn down by the long hours and heat, Senators Blake and Hamilton then nodded to each other and stood up.

"General," said Senator Blake, "this has been the most interestin' briefing and probably the most informative and revealin' one that we've heard on this trip. We appreciate the effort you and your good people have made to present such a thorough job. You will recall we requested you not to put out a lot of spit and polish for us so we aren't goin' to walk around lookin' for dust on the window sills. We're finished. And thank all of you again."

Amid a flurry of handshaking and goodbyes, they picked up their packages and were ready to be driven back to their hotel.

After the sedan had rolled out through the gate, Colonel White and Cooper were left standing alone on the porch. Miss Patterson appeared, distraught and apologetic. "I had an awful time finding the pastry," she began. "What shall I do with it now? I saw the car."

"Miss Patterson, thanks for your trouble. You can just take them home and eat them up yourself if you like. It's quite all right. They wouldn't have helped anyhow," said Colonel White.

Miss Patterson, uncomprehending, went up the stairs with the pastry.

"Was it as bad as all that?" asked Cooper.

"The worst briefing that has ever been presented by this command," said White. "God knows what will happen to MAAG after today. Probably send us all home!" Colonel White went off to his desk.

The General stopped at Cooper's desk that evening. "Jim," he said, "I'd like you to go by the Oriental tonight and look in on the Senators. The Embassy is supposed to take over from here on, but just make sure they don't want anything more."

"Yes, sir," said Cooper. When the General had left he sat jabbing a pencil in the desk blotter. As if dropping in now could do any good! He felt he had just been ordered to attend a wake.

That night, dressed in his best suit, he drove across town to the Oriental. Outside the door of their suite he could hear voices and clinking glasses. Then someone called out for him to come in.

The team was seated around a card table covered with papers. Each member of the party had a drink. Mrs. Hamilton was wearing her silk dress with the diamonds. Cooper asked if there were anything more that MAAG could do for them but they replied in the negative and invited him to have a drink. Glass in hand he sat down, somewhat embarrassed and still resentful. He started to talk about the weather but Senator Blake interrupted.

"Quite an interestin' briefing we had this afternoon," he said. Cooper braced himself, but the Senator said nothing more and sat looking at him. Cooper tried not to fidget. "This is my first experience with a Congressional team," he said.

There was no answer.

"And you, ma'am," he continued, turning to Mrs. Hamilton, "are the first 'lady Congressman' I've met."

She smiled. "What do you think of your first lady Congressman?"

It was a nightmarish moment for him and he managed to mutter something about being charmed.

"Then I assume," she continued, "that you weren't taken in by my silly remarks this afternoon."

He was confused. "Your silly remarks?"

"I mean about the General pushing buttons and Buddhists drinking whiskey."

He felt like Alice in Wonderland. "You mean you knew who pushes the button?"

"I helped write the Military Assistance Bill and I assure you I know," she laughed.

"Then . . . why . . . the questions?"

The room broke into laughter at the look on his face. "Margaret Hamilton and I," said Senator Blake, "have a kind of act we put on. You saw it this afternoon."

"An act?"

"Yes," said Mrs. Hamilton. "Between us we ask all the questions about MAAG. I ask the silly ones."

"But why . . .?"

"Why the silly ones? You should hear some of the answers I get!"

Blake set down his glass and leaned back in his chair. "Captain, we've got a pretty good idea of what goes on in these MAAG missions. But we want to know the details. We take a good, old-fashioned look-see at the operation. It's a rough job to run one of these outfits and the man in charge has got to have a lot on the ball—and damned few illusions. Today we saw a man with guts enough to stand up and lay it on the line. It was most gratifyin'."

Cooper couldn't think of anything to say.

"And now, young man," said Mrs. Hamilton, rising, "we've got paperwork to do. If these gentlemen weren't here, I'd let you take me to dinner."

Cooper rose and said goodbye. Mrs. Hamilton walked to the door with him. "You know, Captain," and her eyes were sparkling, "General Mason didn't miss a thing, even the whipped-cream business, about which he's entirely right." She opened the door. "And, by the way, although I've been away

from anthropology for years, I do remember that phallic worship is Hindu, not Buddhist. That's why I was curious about your...what did you call it...*Sivalung* ...in the temple this morning."

Cooper shut the door and stood in the hallway for a moment. He couldn't quite believe the last quarter-hour. Walking downstairs, he began to whistle softly. Then he decided to stop in at the Bamboo Bar and have a drink.

27

Colonel Childs arrived at his new station, Lampang, two hours earlier than scheduled. He had been driven less by zeal than by the desire to get a distasteful job over with. On his arrival, his first act was to call on the commanding officer, Colonel Thom. The interview wasn't very long. Colonel Thom was polite and, through Major Siri, greeted Childs warmly, welcoming him to Lampang and assuring him that Major Mannon had been doing a superior job as adviser, and he, the Commandant, was highly pleased with it. "A real soldier," said Thom of Mannon.

Colonel Childs smiled a rather chilly smile. At every word of praise for Mannon by the hard-bitten Thai Commander, he sensed an accusing finger being pointed at his own slight paunch and office pallor. He sized up Thom as another "real" soldier—his well-pressed uniform, his easy manner of command and the attitude of the staff convinced him that he was facing an excellent leader with a touch of ruthlessness, all of which increased Childs' distaste for the whole situation.

Childs reminded Colonel Thom, politely, that it might take him several days, or maybe a week, to get his affairs in order and move in completely. He was immediately urged to take his time. Sensing that the interview was drawing to a close, Childs waited for some indication that the Colonel intended to extend an invitation to dinner at his house, or at least

cocktails, which he felt would be fitting for him, the new adviser. No invitation for that evening was forthcoming but *vague mention was made by Siri of a cocktail party after Childs was settled in his quarters.* Childs was extremely annoyed as they left the office for the house where he would live.

Major Siri explained that Mannon had not returned from a reconnaissance trip for a guerrilla-training area and Sergeant Kelly was out at the air strip. Siri himself took Childs over to the quarters. Inside the house, all of Childs' disappointment at having to leave Bangkok welled up again. The first thing he asked Siri was where the smell of horses came from. When Siri explained about Mannon's horse and the improvised stall under the house, he was requested to find a new stable somewhere else as soon as possible. Then, walking around with Siri, the Colonel pointed out the condition of the floors (should be repainted and waxed), the living-room rug (should be replaced) and the wicker furniture (should be repaired). He questioned the purpose of the desk in the living room. When Gony, happy to be of help, sprang forward to explain that Major Mannon used it to write reports, he was told to move it into the Major's bedroom.

After inspecting both bedrooms, Childs decided that the light in Mannon's room was better and he instructed Gony to move the Major's possessions into the bedroom vacated by Sergeant Kelly.

Upon inspection of the area under the house the shower did not meet with Childs' approval. The idea of American officers showering in the open behind a waist-high screen was distasteful to him. Major Siri pointed out that it was a detached house, surrounded by a thick hedge of bougainvillea, but Childs insisted that the arrangement was intolerable. He directed that a complete enclosure be built for the shower—with a light.

They stepped into the kitchen which shone with cleanliness. Childs could find nothing out of place, and besides, the

malevolent face of the Chinese cook intimidated him. He withdrew without comment. Actually, the cook was disappointed. He felt he had been overlooked in the general changing-around so, to save face, proceeded to rearrange the contents of the pantry.

When Siri had left and the Colonel's gear was stowed away in the bedroom, Gony smilingly appeared and asked him if he wanted a drink. After directing the Thai to open a bottle from his Valpac, he sat down with glass in hand. God almighty, what a set-up! He felt ill with frustration.

There was the sound of horses' hooves below. Childs rose and walked to the door to see Mannon dismounting from a horse which Gony was holding. Then, taking two steps at a time, the Major came face to face with Childs in the doorway.

"Hello, Colonel," he said with a look of surprise. He rendered a quick salute. "We weren't expecting you so soon. But it's nice to see you."

"Thank you," said Childs through tight lips. Mannon didn't seem to notice the meagre greeting.

"I've been out on reconnaissance," he said, "and I found the ideal spot for guerrilla training." He held up a handful of maps. "It's got a stream, trees, hills, and just about everything we need. Oh, excuse me," he said, noticing the Colonel's immobile figure. "I didn't mean to bother you about this the first minute of your arrival.

"How does everything strike you?" he asked. Noticing the desk was missing from the living room and seeing a corner of it in Sergeant Kelly's bedroom, he asked, "Oh, did you want the desk?"

Childs winced slightly. "No, I don't. I've made a few changes. That's your bedroom now."

Mannon was silent for a moment and then he turned to Gony. "Excuse me, Colonel, while I get these boots off. Come here, Gony."

Gony, sensing the tension in the room, was not his usual blithe self. Quietly he came over to where Mannon was sitting

and braced himself with his back to Mannon, holding the heel of the boot in his hand while Mannon pushed with the other foot against his rump. This was usually the occasion for laughter and possibly a few obscene remarks but today it was a solemn business. He disappeared into Mannon's room with the boots.

"You see, Colonel," said the Major, too wrapped up in his current project to gauge the depth of the Colonel's irritation, "the anti-guerrilla training these people have been getting is strictly classroom stuff. They keep little notebooks. The only way to learn the subject is to get out in the woods and work at it. They have to be shown these things . . . for instance, the fact that limestone really does kill fish if it's sprinkled on top of a pond."

Childs sat looking at him over his drink. Jesus Christ! Limestone on fish ponds! "How about parachuting?" he asked.

"Well, it might be good for morale if you made your first jump tomorrow morning. Kind of flatter the troops," replied Mannon.

Childs tried to conceal his annoyance. "I mean how is their schedule coming along in general? Do garrison troops make regular jumps?"

"Oh, yes. In fact, they're ahead of schedule. Most of them jump each month instead of once every three months. Now, about you, sir, I suppose you'll want to go on jump status right away?"

The Colonel nodded his head.

"Good. This week the current parachute class make their first training jump. Let's see, today is Wednesday. They'll be jumping tomorrow and Friday. Then there won't be any more parachuting for four weeks, so I suppose you'll want to jump tomorrow. First flight, first man out the door. The Thais would appreciate that!"

Childs' icy control gave way to anger. "I'm not particularly concerned with what impression I make on some Thai pri-

vates! I'll consider the jumping after I've looked things over. And it seems to me that the garrison should confine itself to one jump every three months. No point in being jump-happy!"

Mannon gave him a searching look that made Childs stir in his chair. "I don't mean that I'm against jumping," he added, rather lamely. "It's that my first concern will be to be sure the entire operation is in good shape. Jumping is secondary. After all, it's only a means of transportation."

Mannon started to ask, "In the Parachute School?" but he confined himself to "Yes, sir."

Colonel Childs continued to sip his drink, although it suddenly tasted like varnish.

During the next few days the advisory routine was completely upset by painting, varnishing, polishing and waxing in the house, and the hammering that accompanied the enclosure of the shower stall.

Several additional weeks passed before advisory activities were conducted with anything like their former efficiency, and at the end of the first month of Childs' command the new régime was summed up by Sergeant Kelly in conversation with Mannon. "When you were in charge, sir, we used to do a hell of a lot more work, but it was fun. Now it's just god-damned drudgery."

Gony's ebullient nature was cowed by the Colonel's cold glances, and the cook lapsed into a sullen apathy that matched his naturally sardonic face. Sergeant Kelly carried on, outwardly the same as before but inwardly dissatisfied, especially after Childs relieved him of his supply supervision. He had forgotten to include the special grocery list in a dispatch to Bangkok. Kelly pointed out to Mannon that, thanks to the oversight, they had to go a full week without an ounce of mushroom soup, or a spoonful of Danish herring in wine sauce. Mannon had cut the Sergeant short with a "Mai Ben Rai."

A Thai sergeant named Bayat had managed to ingratiate himself with the Colonel and was named the new supply chief,

working directly under Childs. This further served to widen the gap between the MAAG Chief and his two subordinates.

Only Mannon managed to remain somewhat aloof from the new state of affairs, devoting all of his time to the parachute and guerrilla classes and, thanks to Childs' disinterest, managing to incorporate many of his own ideas into the training programme. The only outward indication of his unrest was the size of his journal, which rapidly expanded into volumes two and three.

Although Childs did not restrict Mannon or Kelly from occasional visits to Bangkok, he himself resolutely stayed in Lampang as though in exile. However, about five weeks after his arrival he suddenly announced that he would spend the coming weekend in Bangkok. In a burst of unaccustomed generosity, he told Mannon that he might go along if he cared to. Mannon accepted and it was set up for them to leave early Saturday morning.

On Friday afternoon, Childs was surprised to overhear Kelly making a phone call to Bangkok for Mannon. He was talking to Captain Cooper about dinner on Saturday night.

That evening, sitting in the living room with an after-dinner drink, Childs casually queried, "What will you do in Bangkok, Mannon? Have a girl friend, I suppose?"

Mannon looked up from the manual he was reading. "No, I'll just bat around. Probably see some MAAG people. Maybe play tennis."

"Who's your partner?"

"This time it will probably be Cooper."

"Oh, yes." And then, after a pause, "I suppose you get all the real scoop about MAAG from him," he ventured.

Mannon looked up with a wary expression and merely smiled. Childs went back to reading *Art of the Ancient Khymer*. Cooper probably didn't have to ask any questions, he thought. Mannon undoubtedly babbled in his witless way about everything that went on at Lampang. He was sorry he had brought up the subject at all.

The next morning, the jeep left for Bangkok and four hours later pulled up in front of the Oriental Hotel to let the Major out. *Childs reminded him that they were to leave at 3 p.m. Sunday. Sharp.*

28

It was early Saturday morning when the telephone call came in from the Embassy office requesting General Mason to report immediately to the Ambassador's office. Since the Embassy did not ordinarily work on Saturday, a feeling of uneasiness swept through MAAG. Colonel White voiced everyone's unrest when he stopped by Cooper's desk after the General had left.

"Doesn't sound very good," he said, lighting a cigarette. "Must be the report from the Congressional Committee. Well, what else can we expect? If we'd deliberately rehearsed that briefing to be as bad as possible, it couldn't have filled the bill any better."

Cooper started to explain the session in the Oriental Hotel but the glint in the Colonel's eye stopped him. Probably anticipates getting his old job back again, as Chief, he thought, with disgust.

The General walked through the deserted Embassy and upstairs to the Ambassador's office, the door of which was ajar. "Come in, Ed," called Ambassador Murphy, "and shut the door behind you."

They both sat down. The Ambassador clasped his hands across his stomach and looked at the General for a moment without speaking.

"Ed," he asked, "what in the name of God did you say to those Congressional people?"

The General's face was impassive. "They got the standard briefing, sir."

"Well, whatever it was, it made one hell of an impression on

them. Evidently their report was responsible for a twix that came in late yesterday." He picked up a long pink telegram. "Thanks to whatever it was you told Blake and Hamilton, MAAG Thailand is being given an additional grant of ten million dollars. This is a special deal, aside from all other support programmes, to be spent as you and I see fit, subject to my approval, for items which are not ordinarily included in the regular Assistance Programme."

The General relaxed in his chair. "Isn't that what you were expecting, Ed?" asked the Ambassador with a grin. Then he laughed outright. "Oh, come on," he said, "I've heard about that briefing! Evidently you laid it on the line and they were so surprised to hear the unvarnished truth for once that they didn't quite know how to react. On the way to the airport they told my aide Halloran about Jim Cooper and how he stopped at their hotel afterwards as though he were on his way to a hanging. They couldn't resist impressing him with the old bromide that honesty is the best policy!"

General Mason managed a weak smile at his aide's naïveté.

"And, Ed," continued the Ambassador, "whatever happened at the Sleeping Buddha temple? Evidently that's already one of Mrs. Hamilton's best stories—Cooper trying to explain some damned phallic symbol to Dr. Hamilton, anthropology Ph.D. and head of the International Society for the Study of Comparative Religions!"

"I hadn't heard that. Cooper didn't say anything about it . . ."

The Ambassador became businesslike. "Well, let's see what we've got here. This grant will be handled through my office and I must put the final approval on the expenditures. Remember, it can't be used in connection with any projects already funded. It must be for other help . . . something of benefit to the Thai military organisation. What did you talk about at the briefing?"

"I mentioned the jungle-warfare items—the pack howitzers, the horses, light mortars and, of course, joint manoeuvres.

None of these items is on the MDAP programme at the moment."

"That's mostly Army, isn't it?"

"Except for the joint manoeuvres . . . yes."

The Ambassador thoughtfully contemplated his hands. "Well," he said, "I don't say that it wouldn't be better to have some kind of a three-way split . . . Army, Navy and Air Force . . . for the sake of harmony. You know the Prime Minister's position. On the other hand, the joint manoeuvres may be a better stabilising factor than we think. Our best bet is to keep absolutely quiet about this whole programme until we work out details of exactly what we think they need. If they get wind of this grant before any projects are firmed up, each Service will start clawing for a third of the money. Better warn your people that this is strictly top secret until further notice."

Back at the MAAG office, the General called for Colonel White, who appeared immediately at his office door, a solicitous expression on his face, all ready to offer commiserations.

"White," said the General, "I want a staff meeting in a half-hour."

At ten o'clock the officers hurried into the conference room, notebooks under their arms, tense with anticipation. The doors were closed and Miss Patterson cautioned to head off visitors and phone calls. Cooper was told not to take notes.

The General took his position at the head of the table. "Gentlemen," he began, "I've called you here today to talk over a matter which will be considered top secret until I tell you otherwise. I don't know exactly how all this came about, but I do know it has something to do with our recent Congressional visitors. We have been granted a special sum of ten million dollars to be expended on projects we wish to inaugurate in Thailand. That is, projects outside the regular MDAP programme."

An involuntary wave of relief swept over the group and they all started to talk at once. The General waited for them to

quiet down. One by one they acknowledged him with new respect . . . the man who could conjure victory of such dimensions out of what had appeared to be disaster.

"I want you to go over your respective programmes," he said, "and extract the items which you feel are absolutely necessary and which do not properly fit into this year's funding programme. Emphasis must be on guerrilla and jungle warfare. You will discuss it with your own people of course, but be sure to warn them that no word of this can be divulged in any manner to the Thais until the Embassy is ready to announce the special grant. Remember now, no fancy projects, no pretty trimmings. Just fundamentals. In materiel, training or otherwise."

"Can the Thai Navy plan on getting approximately three million dollars of this?" asked Commander Enright.

"Thanks for bringing that up, Enright," said the General, "because I want to emphasise that the money will *not* be divided into thirds. I can tell you right now that the Army will probably end up with most of it. The Air Force and the Navy will get some, of course, but only for projects which tie in directly with your crash programme.

"Keep in mind this is a one-shot deal and it's our only chance to get some of these things we've been talking about. No continued or holdover projects will be considered."

Cooper saw disappointment on the faces of the Air Force and Navy Chiefs. Then the Air Force adviser spoke up. "Do you mean, General, that we can't re-submit the request for the additional air wings?"

The General swung around to Harper. "I'll repeat what I just said, Colonel. This money is for requirements *outside* the regular funding programme. Your two additional wings were turned down not because we didn't want to budget for them, but because we didn't feel they fitted into the combat requirements. This grant is not a gimmick to get them back in again!"

The Air Force adviser flushed slightly and nodded his head.

"Any more questions?" asked the General.

The Navy adviser looked up. "I did have, but I don't any more, sir." He hummed a few bars of the "Halls of Montezuma." The General slowly shook his head and the tension was ended by general laughter. "Let me repeat," said Mason, "the Thais will get news of the special grant from the Embassy, not us."

29

Late Saturday afternoon found Cooper, Prasert and Mannon sprawled out in Cooper's room at the Chakri. They had played four sets of tennis in the hot sunshine and now, after showering, each of them wrapped in a Thai pakoma, they were enjoying their frosted drinks. Cigarette smoke wreathed around the room and the hi-fi was playing softly. Cooper realised that Saturday afternoon was his favourite time of the whole week, with the promise of Saturday night, and seeing Tongchai, and all of Sunday still ahead.

The boysan appeared in the doorway. "Hell, let's not make a ceremony out of chow," said Mannon. "Can't we eat, casual-like, somewhere?"

"I've got a better idea," said Cooper. "Let's eat right here. Suwon, run down and get us a menu from the dining room, will you?" Suwon left after depositing a fresh paper bucket of ice cubes on the coffee table.

"Say, I almost forgot to ask," said Cooper. "How is your new boss doing?"

"Having a rough time," laughed Mannon, tracing designs with his finger on the frosty glass. "He's making like slumming. Screwing around like an old woman having her menopause. He wants to set up a cocktail hour after work each afternoon, as though Colonel Thom had nothing better to do than sit around sipping martinis and listening to 'Night on Bald Mountain.'"

"Colonel Thom probably goes home," said Prasert, "puts on

his pakoma and plays cards or listens to the radio and drinks 7 UP."

"Childs has read too many novels," said Mannon. "Do you know he dresses for dinner? Me, too, if I want to eat."

"He'll get tired of that after a while," said Cooper.

"He's already close to flipping his lid anyway," said Mannon, "between writing up those weekly reports and Sergeant Bayat."

"Bayat?"

"The Thai supply man. Graduate of Chakri U. Childs thinks he's the only educated Thai north of Bangkok. Could be, but he's the worst goddamned supply man I've ever seen. The important thing is that he can spell *pâté de foie gras* and *vichyssoise* on the weekly grocery list. Of course the silly son of a bitch can't spell 'snap fasteners' for the parachutes . . . but I guess that's not important. In fact, he forgot to order break-cord for the chutes on the last two requisitions."

"How the hell can you jump without break-cord?" asked Cooper.

"We substitute, one way or another," said Mannon, and then, changing the subject, he went on. "It's rough mainly because Childs took over personal supervision of all supplies after Kelly forgot to send down the fancy grocery list one week."

"Why doesn't he learn to like Thai food?" asked Prasert.

"Are you kidding?" asked Mannon. "He hasn't learned to like hamburgers yet." He turned to Cooper. "Tell me something, Jim. Why the hell was he ever sent to Lampang?"

"Frank, the General didn't send him up because you weren't doing a good job. In fact, it was the opposite."

"Don't hand me that crap, Jimmy, me lad! I shot my mouth off when the Old Man inspected my set-up and Hawley gave it to me right between the shoulder blades."

"You've got a fixation! And you're 100 per cent wrong. After inspecting your set-up the General decided that you were on the right track. That's one of the reasons why he cleaned out the Bangkok headquarters. He wants to see more of your kind of advising in Thailand."

"Then why saddle me with that nitwit Childs?"

"What other paratroopers are there? You. Me. Hawley. That's the lot. Besides, as long as you're up there, what can he do wrong?"

"Hell, he can alienate Thom, fuck up the supply system, ignore guerrilla training and sabotage everything I've tried to do."

"He wouldn't dare. The General likes your set-up."

"Well, he sure as hell didn't show it. Did he say, 'Good work, Old Man'? Or even, 'Drop dead!' Not a word."

"I'm telling you the way he felt."

Mannon studied Cooper through narrowed eyes. "Jim, either you're the cleverest aide in the business or the dumbest man in the Army."

"You forgot another possibility," said Cooper. "Maybe I'm just plain honest."

"Honest Jim Cooper! What do you think, Prasert?"

"I think he's a pudee Thai most of the time."

"You're right, Prasert-san. Absolutely right. God help us all!"

The door opened and Suwon came in with the menus.

Mannon read the card in his hand. "Table d'hôte... Potage, Sole de Chao Phrya, Oie Farcie, Salade d'Asperge, Plats Thailandais, Dessert. Say, man, this is what I had last night at a cunning little place tucked away in Lampang called 'Childs' Tiny Tray Tea Shoppe.' The cook's name was Escoffier. Corporal Ah Chin Escoffier, that is. And a waiter named Gony yelled out the menu. He said, 'Campbell soup, fry fish, canned asparagass and slice peach!'"

"All right, all right, you win!" laughed Cooper. "How about it, Prasert?" The Thai nodded and Cooper turned to the waiter. "Bring up three dinners."

"Hey, that reminds me," said Mannon. "I just found a recipe for tapeworm cure . . . a pinch of gunpowder mixed with some special kind of salt. I've got the name written down somewhere. Is there a drugstore around here?"

"Christ, the menu isn't that bad!" said Cooper.

"No kidding," said Mannon. "I do want to find a drugstore. I need that salt and I've brought a couple of rounds of 50-calibre with me. I'm going to take them apart and use the gunpowder. You ought to pay more attention, Jim. Suppose you're a prisoner of war someday and you find you've got worms? What you gonna do? Just belly up?"

"Chinese drugstore has powdered tapeworms also, I think," said Prasert.

"Now you're talking, Prasert-san," said Mannon. "Tell you what we'll do. I'll buy some tapeworms and feed them to the subject, who is the man clearly designed by nature to have tapeworms, namely Colonel Childs. I'll be the control, which means that I won't have any. Then, when he's writhing around the floor, I'll give him the gunpowder mixture and see what happens. With any luck he'll ask for a cigarette and then all my problems will be over. In short, his world will end, not with a whimper but a bang."

"Come on, Doctor Mannon," said Cooper, as the boysan appeared with the tray. "Have done with all this appetising talk and fall to or we'll never get out of here tonight."

The dinners were set on the coffee table and the three of them slipped to the floor and began to eat.

"Say, there's something else I need," said Mannon. "I've got to find some maps in Bangkok that I can use on reconnaissance and they've got to have the names of towns spelled out the way they're pronounced. If we ever have to use Thai maps in a joint operation we'll be hurting. The towns are never spelled the same way twice. Why? Come to think of it, people's names are messed up too. Take Sarit, for instance. It's spelled Sahrit, Sharit, Srisdi. And a name like Pibul is pronounced Pee-boon but it's spelled 'Pibul.'"

"Ask your missionaries," said Prasert. "They are the ones who translated Thai into English."

"What were they? Some kind of nut?"

"But they were not to blame," said Prasert, "because we

had two alphabets, Thai and Sanskrit, and the missionaries used both of them. When you see 'Srisdi' it is the Sanskrit spelling and when you see 'Sarit' that is Thai."

"That's interesting," said Mannon, putting down his fork, "but not very helpful. You know, Jim, the General is going to have to look into this one of these days. All the maps will have to be overprinted with phonetic spellings of towns."

Cooper nodded. "He's already been considering the problem."

"I have tried to get Jimmy interested in speaking Thai," said Prasert, "but he's too lazy."

"Is it so difficult to learn?" asked Mannon. "We've been doing pretty good with single words."

"That is all the Thai language is," said Prasert. "I cannot make Jimmy understand that. It is an 'isolating language' and so . . ."

"It's isolating, all right," interrupted Cooper through a mouthful of food.

"That means," continued Prasert, "that each word is one syllable and you make a sentence with subject, action and object. So you do not need to have a grammar."

Mannon interrupted him. "Where do the adjectives go?"

"They must follow after each word they modify. So Thai is very easy to speak."

Cooper broke in. "You said you don't need grammar. Then how could you say, 'If one of us should go to the Hoi Chien Lau, the other would remain here.' You couldn't say that."

"Yes, you could. But you must say it like this: 'You go Hoi Chien Lau, I not go Hoi Chien Lau. I go Hoi Chien Lau, you not go Hoi Chien Lau.'"

Mannon grinned. "Now I see why it takes so long for an interpreter. He listens for three minutes then he says, 'He say no.'"

"That's right," laughed Prasert, and they went on with their meal.

When they had finished, Mannon said, "Now why don't

you two go ahead with your plans, whatever they are, and I'll be on my way back to the Oriental Hotel."

"Hell no," said Cooper. "You're coming with us."

"I don't want to be in the way," said Mannon. "This is Saturday night, remember? You are probably going to meet Tongchai and I suppose Prasert has a girl friend too . . ."

"Prasert and I are going to the boxing matches and then down to the Hoi Chien Lau. I'll meet Tongchai there. How does that sound to you?"

"You're sure I wouldn't be screwing up something you guys have planned?"

"No," said Prasert, "and if you come along I will not have to listen to how good he was at tennis."

"Okay. In other words, 'You go Hoi Chien Lau, I go Hoi Chien Lau!'"

"We all go 'Hoi Chien Lau,' " said Prasert.

30

Prasert, for 100 ticals apiece, had managed to get three ring-side seats at the Radjdamneron Bowl in downtown Bangkok where the Thai boxing matches were held. High up in the stands, the Thai band could be heard, its drums, cymbals and high-pitched flutes adding an exotic note to the general noise level.

The contestants in the first bout were described in the programme as Damrong Samarchant (Red corner) 130 pounds :

He is cauliflower with aggressive, scientific and plenty of guts, preferably used fists and feet to run in ring.

and Pramode Chennarong (Blue corner) 132 pounds :

Famous for sending opponents to dreamland and loves to use elbow and knee to finish his work.

The music rose to a crescendo when two young Thais in emblazoned bathrobes came down the aisle and climbed into the ring. Stripping off their robes, they were revealed to be small but husky men, both wearing sateen shorts and no shoes, their insteps being bound with wide strips of adhesive tape.

The band began a low, monotonous throbbing. Each boxer in his respective corner crouched on the mat, bowed his head and, bending forward, slowly lowered his forehead to the floor, at the same time bringing his gloved hands around in a wide circle until they met in front of him. This gesture was repeated several times. Prasert, responding to a nudge from Cooper, explained that they were paying tribute to their coaches. What he did not explain, in the excitement and noise of the stadium, was that they were actually invoking the gods of chance and the spirit of victory, and, at the same time, mustering all their own mental forces for the first onslaught.

When the bell rang, the boxers squared off and shuffled around, making a few tentative jabs. After a left hook which missed, Red suddenly shot his leg out in a swift arc and the bound instep caught his opponent in the small of the back.

Blue countered with a straight right which connected and sent Red reeling backwards. This was followed by a series of blows by Blue's feet, several of which landed on the back of Red's knee and Red momentarily buckled under the impact.

The two Americans could see that a foot, with toes pointed, the instep bound, could become a lethal weapon. In the next few minutes both boxers used their fists and feet alternately. This method of fighting called for expeditious timing, and the impact of foot against jaw could be heard above the roar of the crowd and the crash of the band.

The first match, ending in a TKO at the end of the fourth round, made apparent the reason for limiting this style of boxing to five rounds. Both Red and Blue, thoroughly exhausted, had staggered from the ring.

The next bout was between Yodying Naru (Red) 140 pounds :

One of old-timer highlights in Thai boxing horizon, with elbow smashes, speed and brain. Though having passed 38 seasons, he is still strong and speed to prove his worth in kayo career and outstand his mastership in a toss-up fight with kick.

and Plian Garveewong (Blue) 142 pounds :

He is knockerouter loving aggressive violently and very popular. He is with scientific and brain, with TNT in both mitts and ruthless and tiger heart running into attack opponents and send them to dreamland.

Again, two lithe figures entered the ring and repeated the same kneeling ritual before going into a whirling attack, using elbows and knees in addition to feet. Cooper and Mannon recognised the old familiar story of the professional, ten years older than his opponent, utilising skill and technique to offset his loss of wind and speed. Knowing that he was overmatched in toe-to-toe slugging, Red this time kept aiming his left foot behind and just above his opponent's right knee. He took a series of terrific punches but kept his dogged attack going. Soon a bruise appeared on the back of Blue's leg. In the second round Red's strategy became apparent. Blue's right leg was inclined to buckle and at the beginning of the third round Red rushed home the attack. Blue's leg gave way and he went down.

In the last match the heavyweights (145 pounds each) gave a slashing exhibition which ended when Red caught the full impact of Blue's taped instep across his face and crumpled on the canvas, blood welling from his nose and mouth. Just as the two attendants leaped into the ring and started to lift the boxer on to the stretcher the band struck up the "King's Anthem" and the audience jumped to attention—including the stretcher-bearers—and the boxer was left lying in a slowly widening pool of blood under the brilliant white light of the ring while solemn strains soared over the motionless crowd and

the high-pitched wail of the fifes echoed among the steel rafters.

Back in the car again, they soon were enmeshed in the eternal traffic jam that marked the centre of the city. Forging through the crush of pedestrians, samlors, bicycles and lumbering trams, Cooper found a parking space down a side street. During their walk back towards the seven-story building that housed the Hoi Chien Lau, they passed a Chinese drugstore, a cross between a super-drug emporium and a necromancer's shop. Mannon stopped and reminded the other two of his gunpowder plot. They paused before the brightly lighted windows in which the latest wonder drugs and depilatories were crammed side by side with large jars holding cobras, centipedes and baby monkeys in alcohol solutions. Tiger-Balm cough medicine was displayed beside Chanel Number Five, Guerlain Cologne jostled Miss Clairol's hair dye, and Prasert admitted that heng-sui Thais (both men and women) dyed grey hair.

Going inside, they found counters piled high with mouthwashes, cosmetics and perfumes from England, Germany and France side by side with Chinese, Japanese and Malayan medicines packaged in brilliant red and yellow.

Prasert explained to the rotund Chinese pharmacist what Mannon was looking for and showed him the paper with the name of the salt. The Chinese seemed delighted to serve a ferung who wanted something interesting instead of the eternal vitamin tablets and mouthwash. He produced a small bottle of a whitish powder which he presented to Mannon with bows and wide smiles.

"You aren't really going to drink any goddamned mixture made from that, are you?" asked Cooper.

"Can't be any worse than Thai whiskey... what do they call it, Prasert?"

"Mekong..."

"That's it."

On the way out of the store they passed a counter set up for rapid service. It held a large cardboard poster covered with

small plastic tubes of a dark liquid, each one with a needle attached. A stout, middle-aged Chinese stopped by the counter and, after purchasing one of the tubes, whipped back his sleeve and pressed the needle into his forearm. Squeezing out the contents, he tossed the empty tube on the counter and continued on his way.

"Now just what was that?" asked Cooper.

Prasert looked sideways at Mannon, who grinned.

"It is testosterone," Prasert answered.

"You're joking!"

"No. Ask Mannon if you do not believe me. It is very popular with Chinese."

"It's a kind of pick-me-up," said Mannon, "if you're on your way to a hot date, for instance . . ."

"Jesus Christ! Are you two serious?"

"Absolutely," said Mannon. "The Chinese are the greatest people in the world for aphrodisiacs. Shark's-fin soup, monkey brains, mandrake roots, cucumbers. And they get a charge out of injections by needle. Here you have the irresistible combination."

Cooper stared at them for a moment in disbelief. Then he said, "I'm never going to leave Thailand now. I can see that!"

On their way to the Hoi Chien Lau, Mannon explained why he had never been in the place before. "I understand it's a taxi dance hall," he said, "and the idea of buying a roll of tickets and standing in line to dance with a professional just never appealed to me."

"Then let me take over as guide," said Cooper, "and I'll show you how the Orientals manage it."

In the lobby they took the slow-moving lift to the roof, past floors redolent with the heavy smell of Chinese cooking; the tempting aroma of sweet-sour pork, the acrid scent of soy, bland bean curd and sharp ginger. At the top they stepped into the titillating realm of Priapus—soft music, clinking of glasses and subdued laughter under a sparkling golden shell that covered the outdoor dance floor.

They found a table at the edge of the polished floor and, after ordering drinks, Cooper and Prasert sat back, covertly watching Mannon to see how long it would take him to discover the main attraction. In about a minute he nudged Prasert and nodded towards a bevy of young girls sitting together on the far side of the dance floor.

Prasert and Cooper both broke into laughter. "We should have had a bet on it," said Cooper.

Prasert proceeded to explain to Mannon that they were the dancing partners of Hoi Chien Lau. Twenty-five ticals a half-hour. Drinks extra, of course. And all of it handled with oriental finesse—you simply strolled past the tables and picked the girl of your choice to dance. Sitting in one corner was a middle-aged Chinese in a dark-blue suit who kept track of the time. At the end of the dance, or drinks, or the evening, a slip of paper was unobtrusively handed to you at your table. Cooper pointed out that this was a definite improvement over the roll of tickets and other such occidental crudities.

Mannon was intrigued. "All of them are young and good-looking. Are they Thais?"

"Most of them are Chinese," said Prasert.

"And now, the inevitable question," said Mannon. "Suppose we should make music together and decide to know each other Biblically?"

"That's up to the young lady," said Prasert. "But in any case, she can't leave until after eleven-thirty. There's a sliding scale of rates if she leaves between eleven-thirty and two. That's just to pay the house for her absence, you understand. The rest is up to you."

The seven-piece orchestra, led by a tall blonde Caucasian woman, began a new number and Mannon started to rise, but Cooper stopped him. "Wait just one minute and allow yourself to be discovered by the Tigress."

"Run that one past me again . . ."

"The Tigress has already spotted you," said Prasert.

"You're just not 'in' until she's looked you over," added

Cooper. "She's what you might call the *jeune premiere* of the dancing partners . . . not for boys or old men, even with their injections. She is what you could call, militarily speaking, the lay of the land."

At that moment a woman, who had been sitting alone at one of the tables, rose and slowly began to walk around the edge of the dance floor.

She wore a dark-red evening dress which sheathed her feline body like a layer of skin. A circle of brilliants around her neck accentuated her black hair and sloe eyes. She glided with gentle, half-arrested movements of the hips past the tables. The male occupants tended to hold their glasses in mid air when she approached, studying her with the eye of a connoisseur. It was rumoured that the Tigress recognised every patron of Hoi Chien Lau and could spot a new Embassy face the moment he stepped from the lift. In certain circles, a man's standing depended upon whether or not she stopped at his table to say "Good evening." The Tigress, however, had a rigid code of her own. If a woman were present, she extended no recognition whatever and if the man so forgot himself as to speak he received a bland, uncomprehending stare.

She glanced at Cooper who lifted a hand in recognition, whereupon she stopped. "Hello . . . where have you been?" she asked softly.

After a few amenities, Cooper said, "I'd like you to meet a friend of mine." She turned her dark eyes on Mannon. "You're new here," she said. "I haven't seen you before."

Cooper invited her to join them for a drink. She paused a moment, for effect, and then nodded to the waiter who had been hovering behind her. He went back to her table and returned with her drink.

There was an exchange of polite conversation and Cooper could see that Mannon was intrigued by her. When the orchestra began the "La Cumparsita" he asked the Tigress to dance. She hesitated and looked at him. He nodded in answer to her unspoken question as to whether or not he realised it

was a tango. Then they rose and walked out on the dance floor. In a few moments it became apparent that they were one of the few couples on the floor who really know how to tango. One by one other couples moved out of their way.

Mannon was enjoying himself. He had almost forgotten how it felt to hold a woman in his arms, especially one whose limbs moved in response to his own so lightly and surely and whose warmth he could feel through the silken sheath of her gown.

When they returned to the table Cooper glanced at his watch and explained that he was due to meet Tongchai downstairs and they would take in the late film at the Chalerm Thai Theatre. Prasert also excused himself, having caught the eye of one of the dancing girls across the room.

On his way out, Cooper noticed that Mannon, the intense, avid Mannon, was having a good time. And the Tigress wasn't her usual predatory self. She was sitting back in her chair, relaxed, her eyes on Mannon's face.

The Tigress wanted to hear more about him. She listened, watching as he talked about Thailand, the customs he had observed, his horse, and the smell of the countryside in early morning. She watched the interplay of thought and feeling on his face and saw the occasional flash in his eye and the rare gesture of a sinewy hand.

She was thinking of the men who usually came to the Hoi Chien Lau, tourists with plump white hands and thick wallets crammed with credit cards and photographs; sailors and soldiers, their eyes shining in the half-light with eager concupiscence; stalwart, handsome men, so swaggering and bold and who, so often, in a hotel room proved to have some flaw—some vestige of childhood hurt, or frustration or mother-fixation. And so she saw that they paid, and dearly, for the privilege of standing in the lobby of Hoi Chien Lau with the Tigress on their arm, waiting for a taxi. They paid not only in ticals but in pride and self-esteem—in the knowledge that they had not really possessed her, even in the moments of throbbing fulfilment. Only a few of them were willing to

repeat the experience, being content instead to boast of having known her to their envious friends who watched her pass by, feline and dangerous.

The dark, vibrant man beside her, she realised, neither knew nor cared who she was in that sense. He was talking to her as an equal, with no little side glances to make sure that others were watching, no surreptitious looks at his watch to estimate the ticks already spent.

"Where do you work," she asked.

"I'm not one of the Bangkok boys. I'm up-country, in Lampang."

"Lampang," she said. "There is the . . . what do you call it . . . Paratroop School."

He nodded. "I'm one of the advisers."

"My family lives in Lampang," she said, suddenly, wondering a moment later what had possessed her to admit such a thing.

"Where do they live in Lampang?"

"Oh, they are only farmers. They live . . . at the end of the town . . . on the road to Korat. You wouldn't know . . ."

"There are three houses just over the bridge. Is it one of those?"

She set down her glass. "You *are* familiar with Lampang! Yes, the second house. The middle one. How should you know this?"

"I ride past those houses almost every day. There's a little trail just behind them in the woods."

She picked up her drink again. He was the most unusual man she had met in a long time.

"Then you're a Thai," he said.

Nobody had ever been able to figure out the Tigress' ancestry, and she had wisely let it remain a mystery. Her high cheekbones and deep, slightly oblique eyes suggested some mixture of Oriental and Caucasian blood and she spoke with an intriguing accent. On some nights she was French. Other nights she was Thai. On occasion she could be pure Hollywood. Her mother, now a middle-aged Thai with hair cut

short like a man's, living in a little shack in Lampang, smoking cheroots and stirring rice over a charcoal fire, had once been a dancing girl in Bangkok. The Tigress reflected that somewhere, in the easy relationship of the tropical night, she must have known a man like Mannon.

Then she sensed in Mannon a fierce drive, passion and purpose and tension held in tight check. She could see behind his eyes a reflection of an intense flame that somehow persisted in spite of the Army and the world at large and she felt a rising desire to possess him.

As he talked, she was reminded of an old Siamese method of killing one's enemy. You staked him out on the ground under a wooden rack and then piled rocks on top until he was finally crushed. She knew that is what would happen to this man, finally. The rocks would be the restrictions of the military and the envy and hatred of his fellow-men. She sensed that underneath all that vehemence was kindness, simplicity and great courage. And she knew that these things, even in Thailand, were not allowed to exist. They shamed too many men. So he would be broken. They would see to that. And if he wouldn't break, then he would have to be killed.

The evening continued with more drinks and more dancing. One of the waiters approached her and said a man wished to see her. She looked up and saw, standing by the lift, a tall, immensely stout man with a paunch. He had a full beard and the bearing of a buccaneer.

Excusing herself for a moment, she walked around the edge of the dance floor towards the lift.

He was the captain who had stolen and sold his freighter and its cargo to the Chinese and now lived in opulence at the Oriental. He was already known as a Bangkok "character" and the Tigress was conscious of the interest of everyone in the room.

He was waiting with ill-concealed impatience at her indolent walk. "Goot efening," he said gruffly. She nodded briefly.

"Dey are saying der are no tables," he said peremptorily.

She shrugged and smiled.

"Perhaps you haf saved a table for me . . . ?"

"I'm sorry," she said, "but I am with a friend tonight."

"You are tonight with a friend?" he asked, with surprise. She nodded.

"But ven I come last veek, I tell you I come tonight and ve haf drink togedder . . ."

"I'm sorry," she said coolly. "Perhaps another time . . ."

He took her hand as though in casual conversation, but she could feel his fingers close on her wrist like a steel trap. "I haf somting to talk over . . . vit you . . ."

He saw her eyes flash with sudden anger and desire tightened his grip on her wrist. For a moment she thought her wrist would break, but then she felt several bodies brush against her as a gang of husky Chinese closed in around her. In their midst was the man in the dark suit who supervised the girls. "You please excuse, sir," said the Chinese, "but lady is wanted at the table . . ." His voice was soft but there was no mistaking the ominous ring in it.

The Captain had a sudden premonition of what might happen, knowing that certain government officials who had not been party to his daring scheme might welcome even such an inconsequential thing as a scuffle in a nightclub. He was beginning to realise just how vulnerable was his status in this subtle and devious country.

He released the Tigress, who pulled back her hand, wanting to scream out that he wasn't in some Cantonese dive. But she remained silent, rubbing her wrist.

The lift door opened to disgorge a party of chattering tourists and the Captain, muttering something unintelligible, turned and stepped into the brightly lighted cage. The operator quickly slammed the door and the scene was ended. The Chinese melted back into the crowd and the Tigress returned to Mannon, conscious that every eye was on her. She had obviously turned down the richest man in Bangkok and she knew that by tomorrow night the story would have circulated all over the city.

"It was nothing," she explained to Mannon. "The man thought he had a date with me but he was mistaken."

Mannon studied her now composed face for a moment. "Would you like to leave here and get something to eat?"

She smiled. "Perhaps we could have one more dance before we go."

She was enough of an actress to want a curtain call.

When they returned to the table, Mannon had forgotten about the Chinese and his record-keeping and did not see the byplay behind him; the Tigress had reached out and taken the chit from the man's hand, signalling that she would pay for the evening later. The little man in the dark suit smiled broadly as he withdrew. It had never happened before.

When their cab reached the café that served American food, they found it was closed.

"Maybe we can eat at the Oriental. Why don't we walk over there? It isn't far," said Mannon. Dismissing the cab, they walked arm in arm down the deserted street. Here and there Indian night watchmen for the various stores had either curled up on the pavement or were sitting cross-legged in doorways, in some kind of meditation, the moonlight glinting on their liquid eyeballs. Near the hotel, an old Thai woman came walking along with a pole slung over her shoulder. Suspended at each end was a large metal container, one of which emitted wisps of smoke.

"Hey!" said Mannon. "Here we are. Food!"

The Tigress smiled. "You eat Thai food?"

"Love it. How about some?"

"Of course."

They stopped the woman who, with a wide, betel-stained smile said something in Thai to the Tigress and put down the pole. From one of the containers she extracted two bowls, spoons and napkins. From the other one she filled the containers with steaming noodles.

Bowls in hand, they were looking about for a place to sit

when a samlor came down the street and the driver, seeing them, swung around and pedalled up beside them.

"You want samlor?"

"Right over here," said Mannon. "Park until we finish eating." The Tigress climbed into the seat and Mannon leaned beside the cab while they ate. The samlor driver watched them amiably until the old woman dished up a bowl of noodles and presented it to him with a flourish.

"'On the house' as we say at home," said Mannon, his mouth full.

"You are so funny," said the Tigress. "Never before have I eaten noodles in the street with a ferung."

"They never tasted better."

When they had finished, the old woman took back the bowls and spoons and packed up her portable restaurant and started off in the night with a peculiar shuffling walk she employed to keep the containers from swinging.

"And now take us to the Oriental," said Mannon to the samlor boy. "Go slow," he added, "it's a nice night."

The samlor rolled down the silent street and turned off into the alley which led to the hotel. They passed a high, white-washed wall and came to an open gate. Inside they could see a cloistered courtyard, empty in the moonlight. From somewhere beyond came the deep chanting of male voices. Mannon had the driver stop for a moment.

Salve Regina. . . .

Mater misericordise,

Vita, dulcedo, et spes nostra, salve.

Ad te clamamus exsules, filii Hevae . . .

The solemn invocation echoed throughout the deserted cloister, like a living thing, powerful and moving, conveying a touch of eternity. They sat in the samlor, holding hands, hearing the elegiac surge of the voices. They felt like eavesdroppers, listening to men atoning for all the sins of the city.

"It is the mission. Those are the monks," said the Tigress.

Mannon nodded. "I haven't heard that for a long, long time," he replied, smiling to himself and thinking how strange it was that he should be sitting in a samlor, in Bangkok, holding hands with the Tigress and listening to the "Hail, Holy Queen . . ."

He motioned for the driver to proceed. For an altar boy in old St. Peter's in Columbus, Ohio, I've come a long way, he told himself.

In the lobby of the Oriental, the Thai room clerk who had been nodding over the desk, straightened up at the sight of Mannon and his guest. He handed out the key with a look of respectful admiration on his handsome young face.

"You said you were married?" asked the Tigress, settling herself on the divan in Mannon's ornately decorated room.

"Once, a long time ago," he replied, offering her a cigarette.

"What happened to her?" She accepted the cigarette.

"It was a war marriage. Just before I went overseas. She died when I was away, in childbirth."

"And the child?"

He shook his head.

"Then you have no wife, no family at all?"

"That's right."

"I think maybe you loved her very much."

"I did," he said, sitting back on the divan beside her and exhaling the smoke from his cigarette. "It was a long time ago."

"But how do you live . . . without a wife . . .?"

"Until tonight it wasn't too difficult . . ." He sat up and looked at her. She reached over and laced her fingers in his. It was a simple gesture and no one from the Hoi Chien Lau had ever known her to make it.

Wordlessly they stepped out on the balcony where, across the river, the Wat Arun shone like a silver pillar in the moonlight, sublime in its grandiose pretension and exquisite

symmetry. They could see the heavens, hung with shimmering *rivières* of stars. Out on the river a steamer slowly moved upstream leaving a path of phosphorous churned into fire by the propeller. Below them, the hotel garden was mottled with grey and purple shadows.

Mannon, conscious of her perfume, haunting as sandalwood, and of the rustle of her silk gown, turned towards her to encounter a pair of eyes dark with the hunger of her feline counterpart. He knew he had waited for this night for a long time.

Back in the room, there was a prescient savagery about her. It was the touch of Asia in her blood and spirit . . . not the soft, languid Asia of the tropics but the wild northern wastes with their cruel beauty. Her black, disordered hair emitted a sharp sweetness. No sounds came from her throat in the silent struggle of torn silk and compulsive limbs. Gone was the faint smile of amusement and derision which had crushed the complaisant ferungs. His teeth grated on hers in an onrush of awakened hunger, and fulfilment came with the unbearable suddenness of a rapier thrust as their bodies fused in a surge of pain and passion.

Afterwards, lying quietly in pulsating fulfilment, they could hear the faint sounds of music from the orchestra in the Bamboo Bar playing its last number of the evening. Somewhere on the ceiling a tokay suddenly emitted his idiotic cry.

But they were not listening.

31

On the following Monday morning, Miss Patterson padded over to Captain Cooper's desk at the MAAG headquarters. "It's a telephone call for you, Captain," she said. "A woman's voice," she added with a sidelong glance.

When he picked up the phone Cooper found he was talking to the proprietress of the Oriental Hotel who, in broken English, asked if a MAAG representative could come down to the

hotel at his earliest convenience. She had something of importance to tell him.

Without saying anything to the General, Cooper drove down on his lunch hour. He recognised the owner as the woman he had seen in the Bamboo Bar dancing with the bearded sea captain. Seated behind her desk, she had all the authority of a concierge in a Parisian pension. Just past middle age, with ginger-coloured hair and a milky-white complexion which had obviously been sheltered from the tropical sun, she sat smoking a cigarette.

Cooper introduced himself and she asked him to sit down. Then she turned and shouted to one of the page boys. "*Apportez-moi le colis*," and he brought in two rounds of 50-calibre machine-gun bullets in metal links. Madame looked at them as though they were poisonous. Cooper thought they did look lethal on the desk.

"Thees things," she said, pointing, "were found in *la chambre* of Major Mannon thees morning. In a few moments the *porteur* would put them in the fire with the . . . *papier d'emballage* . . . the how you say . . . waste paper. Then bang, bang! And the police would arrest me. *Mon Dieu!* Do you onderstan' the law in Bangkok? No weapons, no ammunition *dans la ville* . . ."

Cooper, remembering Mannon's tapeworm cure, was so relieved he started to smile.

"Thees man was from the MAAG, no?"

"Yes, he is, Ma'am. He's from up-country."

"But why should he bring thees thing in the hotel? Thees is *la ville*, not . . . the battlefield!"

Cooper said, "I think I know the circumstances," and then he realised how impossible it ever would be to explain. "He was working on a project . . .," he continued, "and he must have forgotten them. Why don't you just give them to me?"

With a sigh of relief she handed him the ammunition.

"I will see that this is brought to the attention of the proper people," he said. She relaxed and smiled for the first time and

offered him a cigarette from the can of Players on her desk.

As he took one, she leaned forward. "*Ecoutez!*" she said softly. "In the morning, the boy report that Room 401 have order *petit déjeuner pour deux* . . . you onderstan' thees room is *chambre à un lit* . . . for one person . . ."

"Did he pay for them?"

"Ah, *bien entendu!*" she exclaimed. "He ees a fine man . . . I do not say thees for the embarrassment. His guest ees . . . how do you say . . . the Leopard . . .?"

"The Tigress!"

Her lips curved. "*Oui!* The *garçon* believe perhaps *petit déjeuner* should be . . . for such a man . . . *libre* . . .!"

Both of them laughed and Cooper rose to go with the bullets in his hand. "I'm sorry about these," he said, "I wouldn't want to see you down at the police station, madam." He studied her buxom figure and thought of the cages where petty offenders were held until the police questioned them . . . small iron cages where Thai offenders crouched, patient and smiling, occasionally eating the bananas and rice which were poked through the bars.

She mistook his scrutiny so he tried to explain. "I mean . . . those . . . *boîtes de police* . . ."

"Oh!" she shrieked with laughter . . . "You . . . are a terrible man . . .," and she rose. "*Je le regrette* . . ."

"That's all right madam. I'll take care of it."

"*Merci* . . .," and her eyes twinkled for an instant . . . "*Mes compliments à Monsieur le Major* . . ."

32

The staff and department chiefs of MAAG assembled in the Conference Room with their notebooks and papers. This time, Cooper was to make a record of the meeting. Each member of the conference came prepared with a list of projects he recommended for the special grant.

Commander Enright's list was short and of a minor nature. Pointedly, he omitted any reference to Marines.

Colonel Harper rose and droned along about specialised schooling for pilots, the construction of new air strips for the use of helicopters and light aircraft. When he reached an item concerning infantry training for several units of airfield guards the General interrupted. "Just a moment. Go over that one again, please."

"Well, sir," said Harper, "this is a project that Marshal Wicharn has had in mind for some time. He wants all the air-base guards trained as regular infantry so they can guard against sabotage of the airfields, especially since the newest equipment from the U.S. is very expensive."

"But he already has his anti-aircraft units, hasn't he? All they need is some additional training."

"But he feels, sir, that this would not be enough. He wants regular infantry . . ."

"If he needs more guards, I'm sure the Army can furnish them."

"Army troops on an Air Force installation?"

"Why not?"

"Sir," said Harper, drawing himself erect. "I'm afraid Marshal Wicharn would never allow any of Marshal Chit's men on his bases . . ."

Colonel White broke in. "It's a political situation, actually, General, he isn't . . ."

"Then he can send a couple of units up to the Army training centre and have the Army train them as ground troops, that's all."

"But the Army say they don't have the instructors and facilities for training these Air Force men."

"That's nonsense!" snapped the General. "There's no unit in the Thai Army so overworked that they can't take on a couple of extra companies. Maybe they might even forgo a holiday or two. Isn't that right, Hawley?"

"Sir," said Hawley, with a grimace, "the Air Force is thinking in terms of a regiment . . . maybe two."

"A regiment!"

"Yes, sir. They'll be opening up new bases all over the country," said Harper.

"Jesus Christ!" interjected the General. "And then what? Next I suppose they'll want tanks and artillery. Ever since I've been here it's been the same goddamned thing. The Navy wants Marines, the police have paratroopers and now the Air Force wants an army. These people have got to realise that their resources just aren't big enough for all these things. If we can't do it in the States, they sure as hell can't do it here!"

"But, sir," said Harper, "the protection of their own airfields is a legitimate function of the Air Force . . ."

"Nothing is legitimate if you don't have resources, Colonel!"

Colonel White broke in. "Sir, there are certain political problems involved in this which I don't believe we've . . ."

"Colonel White, I will not involve MAAG in politics!" said the General with some heat. "That's Ambassador Murphy's job. We are here to advise these people on how to improve their defensive capabilities. And that's that! If they won't accept our recommendations, they can say so. But we are *not* mixing defence and politics!"

The General turned to Harper. "How many troops do you think they actually need for this project?"

"Well, sir, their figures show that . . ."

"I'm asking what *you* think."

There was a moment of silence while Harper stared back at the General. Cooper detected genuine animosity in his eyes. "I accept their figures."

The General folded his hands. "In that case, I want to see a complete staff study on the project. The size of the airfields, the number of men to guard each one—based on the standard guard mounts—and so on and so forth."

"Yes, sir."

Colonel Hawley explained the Army projects, which in-

cluded items the General had discussed with the Prime Minister, and then the G staff came up with various items, including the joint manoeuvres.

At the end of an exhaustive three hours, the first rough draft of the projects was made up and handed to each Chief for further clarification. The General's prediction proved true: the Army came off with the largest share of the grant, with the Air Force second and the Navy a poor third.

Just as Cooper was about to leave for the day, the General called him into the office. "Jim," he said, motioning for him to sit down, "this is about Miss Patterson. Have you noticed anything . . . peculiar about her lately?"

"No, sir."

"Well, she's done something kind of odd. Yesterday in the reading file I saw a message from Clark Field on Sergeant Davies and his transfer. It was completely screwed up. It read as though Clark were refusing to send a replacement. I questioned the twix and the Adjutant tracked it down. He found Miss Patterson had copied it all wrong. Looks as though she's cracking up. Damn it, I don't know why we bother with civilians over here anyway. I just wondered if you'd noticed how she's been acting around the office."

"Sir, she's never been a particularly good stenographer, but she's improving. I do think she's honestly trying to sharpen up. That's why it's hard to understand this business on the twix."

"Keep an eye on her anyway," said the General, "and let me know if there's anything wrong . . . if she's having any problems that MAAG can help her with."

"Yes, sir."

The following afternoon, General Mason took the completed recommendation on the special grant to the Embassy. On his return he announced that the Ambassador approved the paper. The Chiefs were again cautioned not to discuss the grant with the Thais.

Cooper, at his desk at MAAG headquarters late one afternoon, received a phone call from Mrs. Mason, asking him to bring the current roster of Thai armed-force officers over to the house. She was writing invitations for a dinner party and wanted to check out the names.

When Cooper arrived at the General's house, Mrs. Mason called to him from the lanai where she was sitting with a sherry and, after receiving the list, asked him to join her. Seated beside her, glass in hand, he noticed that Mrs. Mason was somewhat nervous. "Jim," she said, "I don't quite know how to bring this up, but it's something you should know. At tea, the other day, one of the Thai wives called me aside and mentioned something about . . . well, about you and that Thai girl . . . Tongchai . . ."

Cooper stiffened at her words, despite her reassuring smile.

"She was joking about the fact that the Thais have noticed you spend a great deal of time at Tongchai's house, somewhere down by the Chao Phya . . ." She stopped and tasted her drink. Cooper was silent. "You know how the Thais are, Jim," she continued. "They notice everything, no matter how trivial . . ."

He stirred in his chair. "Yes, Mrs. M.," he said, finally, "I do spend time there. A lot of time. I like her very much."

"Well," she replied, with a sigh, "that's all there is to it. Of course I told her that it was just silly gossip. The only reason I brought it up at all was because . . . well, harmless though it is, sometimes a little thing like this can create talk all out of proportion . . ."

Cooper felt as though the bottom had dropped out of his life. "I don't quite know just what you mean, Mrs. M. Are you suggesting that I don't go there any more?"

"Please believe me, Jim," she said, with a smile. "I'm not

trying to interfere with your private life. I just wanted to remind you that these things are noticed, even in Bangkok. You're the General's aide and she's a nice girl. I know you wouldn't want gossip to go on. You see, the story was that your car has been parked there overnight . . . and sometimes the entire weekend."

"Mrs. Mason," he said, feeling the heat rise in his cheeks, "it seems to me that these Thais can't have much to do . . ."

She reached over and lightly patted his hand. "I understand, Jim. But the Thais are very interested in all aspects of MAAG. I'm sure you don't want Tongchai's neighbours to gossip about her."

Cooper put down his glass and took a deep breath. "Mrs. Mason, I suppose I might as well tell you. I love Tongchai. And she feels the same way about me. We're thinking about marriage. So whoever has been watching my car can relax and mind his own business."

"Marriage?"

"Yes."

"Jim, have you thought of all the . . . problems . . . in marrying a Thai girl?"

"You mean differences in race and religion?"

She nodded. "Those things. And your Army career."

"I don't see what it has to do with my Army career. Lots of officers marry foreign girls."

"I know," she nodded. "But I was thinking about your future. Intelligence, for instance. You can't hold certain jobs in the G-2 with a foreign wife. And many clearances will depend on your marital status . . ."

"Then I'll just have to forgo those jobs."

"Do your parents know about this marriage yet? Do they approve?"

Cooper looked at the handsome woman sitting on the tastefully furnished lanai and then remembered his own home, with his indifferent father and his smothering, bitterly practical mother. Suddenly he hated both of them. "I'm sure

it would make no difference to them," he said aloud. "Besides, I'm the one who's getting married."

Mrs. Mason smiled. "Jim, how long have we been in Thailand now? Almost a year, isn't it? Is that time enough for you to be sure just what you want?"

"Mrs. M.," he replied, "how long does it take to be sure of loving someone? Didn't Shakespeare say, 'Who ever loved who did not love at first sight' . . ."

Mrs. Mason smiled to herself, apparently remembering something. Then she picked up her glass and sipped the wine. "Shakespeare isn't always infallible on these things," she said gently. "It's so easy to be swept away. Especially a bachelor, alone in Thailand. This isn't real Army life at all, you know. Things take on a sort of glamour here in Bangkok. You're seeing this girl in her own setting. She belongs here. Sometimes people change when you remove them. Have you met her parents?"

"I saw her father once. He is Kuhn Thanom of Chakri University."

Mrs. Mason nodded. "I'm sure he's a most worthy person. But marriage is so important. You'll have to give it a lot of thought. Edwin has always wanted a bachelor aide. It's even possible he would have to get someone else. I'm sure he wouldn't want to, of course, nor would I . . ."

Cooper sat for a moment, cracking his knuckles.

"I suppose I'd be sent up-country," he said.

Mrs. Mason shrugged. "Or home."

Cooper watched a tropical bird flitting around a banana tree in a corner of the lanai. The smell of ginger was in the air and he was thinking of some Army post in the Midwest, set in a dreary waste of prairie.

"I didn't bring this up," continued Mrs. Mason, "to upset you, Jim. The General doesn't know anything about this and I don't intend to mention it to him. I merely wanted you to know about it. All of us have a certain responsibility here in Thailand and I certainly don't want to precipitate anything.

Maybe it would be wise if you tested your feeling for this girl by not seeing her for a week or two . . .”

Cooper did not answer and Mrs. Mason, after a moment, set down her glass and rose. “Now, Jim,” she said, lightly, “don’t be glum about it. You just run along and think over what we’ve said. Forget the silly gossip. Just be circumspect and don’t give them an opportunity to talk about Tongchai.”

In the car on his way home, Cooper thought over the conversation with the General’s wife. The question of marriage had never actually been discussed by him and Tongchai but he realised that their life in the little house by the river was doomed.

Parking the car up by New Road he went down to the little shack and knocked on the door. Tongchai, in his arms, was more desirable than ever before. He held her, looking around at the beautiful little room with a sense of physical pain at the thought of losing it. Later, lying on the divan, he explained Mrs. Mason’s conversation to her.

“Tongchai,” he said, “let’s end all this and just get married . . .”

“Married?”

Putting his arms around her he murmured in her ear. “Then everything will be simple. No more worry, no more dodging around . . .”

She pulled away and looked at him. “We must go away from here?”

He looked around the room. Loving it as he did and knowing what it meant to both of them, he shrank from explaining to her that as a married officer, and the General’s Aide, he must have a proper house, with a dining room for occasional buffet suppers, a lanai for entertaining, a house boy and a cook . . . all the accoutrements of Army social life. “But, don’t you see,” he explained, “we won’t have to stay here any more. We can have a house . . . anything you like. I’ll get an extra allowance . . .”

"You do not like this place?"

"Of course I do. You know that."

"Then why must we go away?"

He was at a loss for words. "I thought you'd want to. We can have a nice, big place, a house of our own. We can fix it up like this . . ."

"You mean in Bankapi . . . with the other MAAG people?"

"Not necessarily. Any place at all . . . that you like!"

She turned her head away. "I was right before. You do not like this place. Now you want to go away. Mrs. Mason is very clever, that's why she is the General's wife. You talk with her and now you want to go."

"Tongchai. You don't understand," he said, turning her face towards his gently. "Mrs. Mason will help us, if we want her to."

He saw, with surprise, that her eyes were filled with tears. "I do not want to go away," she said. "But now you are ashamed."

"Please! I'm *not* ashamed! It's just that I want us to be together always . . . man and wife . . . anywhere."

"I do not know how to act in Bankapi. I hate Bankapi! I have seen the wives of the Army people. Like Mrs. Childs! I do not want to be like that."

"Tongchai," he said, desperately. "How can I make you understand!"

They ate that night in a little Chinese restaurant but Tongchai was silent and withdrawn. After the meal, Cooper, still puzzled and now annoyed, said he would go back to the Chakri.

"Already you are afraid to stay with me," she said sadly when he kissed her goodnight.

Back at the Chakri he picked up the phone and called Prasert. When the Thai arrived, Cooper had poured himself a drink and was sitting morosely on the balcony overlooking the Palace. Cooper explained to Prasert what had happened.

"What the hell can I do about it, Prasert-san?" he asked.

The Thai shrugged. "I have told you this a long time ago, Jimmy. But you did not listen. What can I say to Tongchai now? This is something between the two of you."

"Who the hell could have told Mrs. Mason about my car? I always park up by New Road and I've never seen anybody around."

"Are you so naïve to think that the Thais don't see the car up there?" asked Prasert incredulously. "A MAAG car? Parked every day? The Thais see everything."

"They're a bunch of nosy sons of bitches!"

"No, Jimmy. They are interested. That's all. They do not mean to harm by it. They like to talk about it. They have nothing else to do."

"How the hell do they know I'm from MAAG?"

"The licence plates."

"It's a plain, ordinary plate . . ."

Prasert shook his head. "The first number of the licence means MAAG. Every policeman in Bangkok knows that. And many other people, too."

"Why do we get special plates?"

"Because the police do not want to embarrass you when you make a wrong turn in the street, or something like that."

Cooper poured himself another drink. "Why should Tongchai be so reluctant about getting married. She sounds as though she doesn't want to."

"I cannot say anything about that, Jimmy, without making you angry," said Prasert.

"Say it anyway! I promise not to be mad."

"Do you remember a long time ago at Bang San I told you about Thai women? And you did not believe me. But I am right. Thai people are different from Westerners. It is not only Bankapi which Tongchai does not like. She does not want to be an Army wife!"

"But she loves me. I know that. We've been together now for almost a year!"

"Jimmy! Always I know this will happen. So what can I say now? When a ferung is in love he thinks he has . . . all this and heaven too . . . but this is not true."

"Are you trying to say she doesn't love me?"

Prasert sighed. "I cannot explain. Yes, she loves you. But she also loves the little room by the river. And to go to the cinema and sleep with you. But she does not want to be the bridge-party wife, and the housekeeper, and all those things. She is a Thai!"

Cooper straightened up in his chair. "If I weren't in the Army, if I were a civilian . . . one of the traders, then she wouldn't mind, would she? And we could live in the room by the river or any other goddamned place. Nobody would care."

"Are you saying you would get out of the Army?"

"If necessary!" said Cooper, grimly.

"You are talking like a crazy person."

"You don't understand, Prasert."

The Thai sat silently for a moment. "I do. Already you are a beachwalker."

"What the hell do you mean by that?"

Prasert sat for a few moments without speaking. Then he asked, slowly, "Why are there no books of yours down in Tongchai's room?"

"Now what does that have to do with the problem? Should there be?"

"Because before you knew Tongchai, you read all the time. Now you never read. Have you opened a book since you knew Tongchai?"

"Reading hell! I'm tired of reading. I want to live."

"For you that is a part of living. And I think a very important part. Have you read the history of Thailand that I gave you? Or have you studied the Thai language?"

"I've learned a lot of Thai . . ."

"Bedroom Thai, I think."

"Jesus Christ, Prasert! What are you trying to prove?"

"That Tongchai is with you an infatuation . . . you call it . . . and some day you will want to be the James Cooper that I knew first in the Bamboo Bar."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"All right, Jimmy. But you asked me . . ."

"I'm sorry, Prasert. But I don't want the Army without Tongchai. I don't want anything without her. I could get a job with the East-West Trading Company. I could live in Bangkok the rest of my life . . . and be happy."

"To work you must have permission from the Ministry of Commerce."

"I'll get it!"

"Have you forgotten that Marshal Wicharn is the Chief? He must approve this!"

"Good. He knows me."

"But Jimmy, what about General Mason?"

"I don't give a good goddamn about General Mason, or Mrs. Mason or any of them."

"You are mad! General Mason would be embarrassed if his own aide must ask Wicharn for permission to work in Bangkok!"

"Prasert, will you do something for me? Can you get the forms or whatever I have to fill out, and handle it for me? It's your own Ministry."

"How can I be part of this? I cannot help you to ruin yourself."

"I want to be happy. Is that so bad?"

"This is not happiness. It is how you say . . . craziness . . ."

"If you won't, I'll get somebody else . . ."

Prasert sighed. "Jimmy, why do you not go ahead like you are now? Don't park the car on New Road any more. Maybe everything will be different between you and Tongchai now. Maybe you will get tired of her . . . or she will get tired of you . . . and then you would have no problem. If you were a Thai and could have two wives . . ." Prasert stopped when he saw the look on Cooper's face.

"I wish you wouldn't joke about it," said Cooper. "We love each other. And we're going to be married. If she doesn't want to be an Army wife, then I'll get another job. And to hell with everything else. Will you help me?"

Prasert studied him for a moment. "All right," he said quietly, "I will do what I can. It will take some time. These things are very complicated."

"I don't care how long it takes just as long as we get it started."

34

Cooper had just seated himself at his desk when a telephone message was received requesting the General's presence at Ambassador Murphy's office. A half-hour later he and the General were standing in front of Mad Mike, who handed Mason a Thai newspaper clipping to which a translation had been attached.

"Read that, Ed," he said. "Air Marshal Wicharn, wearing his Minister of Commerce hat, says he's starting a road-building programme which is going to cost three million dollars."

The General continued to read while the Ambassador leaned back in his chair. "It looks damned funny to me," he continued, "and if word of this gets back to Washington, I'm afraid it will jeopardise that special grant. If the Thais have three million dollars for roads, then they don't really need any extra assistance."

The General finished reading the translation and laid it on the desk. "The map attached to the clipping shows the new road system will cover the entire country," he said.

The Ambassador nodded. "Ed, there's something odd about this whole thing," he mused. "It strikes me that this is what Wicharn might do if he had heard about the grant and figured he would get a third of it. Then he could transfer three million from the Air Force Budget to the Commerce Department . . ."

"I'm scheduled to talk to the Prime Minister today," said

the General. "I could ask him about it, in a roundabout way, of course."

"Give it a try."

In the Prime Minister's office, that afternoon, the General brought up the road-building project. The Prime Minister looked at him for a moment with a quizzical expression. "I have not seen the article, General, and I don't understand it. We do not have three million dollars to spend on roads."

General Kawee interjected, "The Air Marshal is off on one of his usual tangents, I think. You should pay no attention to newspaper stories. They always exaggerate."

The General then dropped the subject and went on to other items in his notebook. He briefly mentioned the guerrilla-warfare and air-ground schools, both of which would begin in a short time. The two Thais nodded in agreement.

He had started to talk about the light howitzers when the Prime Minister interrupted. "Perhaps we should give more thought to the pack artillery, General. It seems to be a very small weapon for such a big job."

The General glanced up in surprise. "But, Your Excellency," he said, "if you remember, we discussed size before. The main advantage of these light howitzers is that the larger ones are impossible to move in the jungle."

"I remember, General. But perhaps further consideration . . ."

"We have already forwarded a request for these weapons."

The Prime Minister shrugged.

The General, after looking at him for a moment, went on. It was soon apparent that any mention of horses, or light mortars, met with the same response. Finally, the General brought up the subject of the joint manoeuvre. The Prime Minister indicated that it would be held as scheduled, but he doubted that he would be able to attend.

Cooper saw that the General, faced with this inexplicably hostile attitude, was attempting to bring the conference to a

quick close when the Prime Minister brought up the subject of two additional air wings for the Thai Air Force.

"Sir," replied Mason, "we discussed the additional wings some time ago with Marshal Wicharn and he himself agreed that with the personnel now available, it would not be feasible."

"Perhaps he has changed his mind," said the Prime Minister coolly. "Maybe your Air Adviser and the Marshal might talk it over again."

"But fiscal year appropriations have already been approved by Congress."

General Kawee broke in. "Maybe we could get some of next year's appropriations."

The General's face flushed. He snapped his notebook shut. "There is no such thing as 'next year's appropriations,'" he said. "MAAG budgets for them, of course, but they are voted upon by Congress each year. I'm not saying that they won't continue, but this is a year-to-year proposition, dependent entirely on the situation."

"Is there any possibility of additional help?" asked Kawee. Cooper saw the General shift in his chair and he knew how much the Old Man hated to answer. "That's a subject I'm not prepared to discuss right now," he said, finally, and the interview was over.

On the way back to MAAG, General Mason rode in silence, looking out of the window. When they reached the Embassy, he asked to be let off and ordered the chauffeur to pick him up later.

"I don't understand it either, Ed," said the Ambassador after he had heard of the conference. "You say they bought all these things a few weeks ago. And now, suddenly, they don't want them and they're even talking about more air wings. And Wicharn announces the road net."

"Yes, sir," said the General.

The Ambassador sat with his chair tipped back, tapping a

pencil on his desk blotter. "My guess," he said, "is that they've found out about the special grant. Maybe they figure we are trying to pull a fast one. If so, the Prime Minister has had all three Services on top of him for their share. It's possible that the Air Force and the Navy think you and he are working together with the Army. Or the Prime Minister himself may feel you are in this, somehow, for your own good. God almighty! There's no end to this speculation! The only thing we can do now is to ride it out and see what happens. Meantime, I'll check and see if I can find a leak around here. You'd better do the same. If anybody has talked, I'll nail his hide to the wall. You should do the same if it turns out to be someone in your shop."

The General rose to leave. "There's another item which may fit into the picture. Wicharn now wants almost two regiments of Air Force troops trained as infantrymen. To protect the airfields."

"Two regiments! Just to protect airfields?"

"Too many for the job, of course."

The Ambassador sat up in his chair. "Wait one! Remember the new road net? If those roads are built, the Army has no excuse to hold tanks and artillery in Bangkok. They could be moved out. Then, with the Air Force having two regiments of infantry in the city . . . well, you can see the interesting possibilities!"

The General shook his head. "All this makes my position here just about impossible. Up to now, I've had the confidence of the Prime Minister. If it comes to the point where he doesn't trust me or my judgment, then there's nothing for me to do but request to be relieved of the assignment."

The Ambassador came around the desk. "I don't think it will come to anything like that, Ed," he said, clapping him on the shoulder. "Let's wait and see if we can find out what the hell is going on, first."

Several weeks later, the air-ground school graduated its

first class and the joint manoeuvre was held near Sattahip. It was a great success. It was the first time that all three Services had ever worked together. The diplomats and military attachés were treated to the spectacle of the Thai Air Force napalming, strafing and bombing in close conjunction with the other Services.

The Prime Minister, in spite of the importance of the event, was not present and Marshal Wicharn, although he managed to speak to the attachés, somehow did not find time to talk to General Mason during the entire operation.

35

Hurt by Tongchai's lukewarm reaction to his talk of marriage, Cooper had resolved not to see her again until she called him and explained her reluctance. Accordingly, on the night following their discussion he had gone directly from MAAG headquarters to his room at the Chakri. After several hours of listening to the radio and staring out of the window, he went downstairs to the cocktail lounge where he promptly fell into the conversational clutches of Mr. Blair who, sipping orange juice and discussing politics, had kept him there until after midnight.

On the second night, Cooper avoided the lounge and went directly to his room. Picking up a book on Thai history, he resolutely opened it and began to read. Doggedly, he read page after page, retaining nothing of the subject—conscious, meanwhile, of the silent telephone beside him.

He tried to imagine what his life would be like if he never saw her again, but the vision of another man enjoying her laughter and childlike naïveté, and knowing her slender, golden body finally proved too much for him. He slammed the book shut and lit a cigarette.

She had said she did not want to be part of the Army and he did not blame her. During those few days MAAG

had come to represent, to him, the part of America he hated and the General and his wife were the personification of those detestable qualities. Mrs. Mason, in her conversation, had revealed to him that as far as she was concerned, his relationship with Tongchai was simply something *they* didn't want to hear about, and therefore must be destroyed. He savagely crushed out his half-smoked cigarette and began pacing up and down the room, thinking about the MAAG families, huddled together in Bankapi—the enamelled, hard-eyed, bridge-playing wives, so sure of themselves, so patronising towards the Thais, discussing their former posts—all better than Bangkok, naturally—utterly oblivious of the teeming, colourful city around them. Cooper recalled their complaints about Thailand . . . prickly heat, mosquitoes at Government House dinners, their endless bouts with dysentery . . . he remembered wincing as they coyly referred to it as “Bangkok Belly.”

He recalled that even his wild, carefree Iris had needed all kinds of attention to keep her carefree . . . the fur coat, the car, the new living-room suite . . . her music arrangements . . . always something that cost money and forged another fetter to keep him tightly immobile.

Not one of those women, he reflected, ever offered a man the warmth and simplicity of Tongchai, wrapped in a pakoma, in her little room by the river. He realised how wise she was to refuse to become part of Bankapi and he regretted that he had ever suggested it.

He lit another cigarette and stepped out on the balcony. Rising above the battered walls of the King's palace, he saw the spires of the palaces and temples, sheathed in refulgent gold, glittering in the sunset like tongues of flame against the violet sky.

He could not imagine life without Tongchai. What could he do now that he had known her? Read every night? Talk to Prasert? Listen to Blair? If he gave her up it would mean that he had allowed the suspicion and jealousy of the envious

to destroy the warm, sensual world in which he had found the only happiness he had ever known. He could imagine his mother's face, if she knew about it. "You can't just go native!" she would say, her mouth frozen in righteousness. "Come home and get yourself a nice little car and a nice little job and a nice little house . . ." He could imagine the other clichés she would dredge up to make sure that life would be as grinding, miserable and monotonous as possible.

Ignoring the colourful sight before him, he walked back into the room. Slamming the door, he went down to the car-park. Jumping into his Vauxhall he spun the wheels savagely in the gravel and, after a screeching whine, the car roared out of the drive towards New Road.

There was no response to his knock at Tongchai's door so he let himself in, snapping on the soft amber light in the pierced brass lantern which hung over the divan. The room was more beautiful than he had remembered . . . the soft white tones of the carpet, the gold brocade at the window and the subtle touches of scarlet. He turned on the gramophone and the haunting strains of "Love Is a Lonely Road" filled the room and blended with the murmur of the great river outside the window. Slowly he walked around, holding Pon, their "son," in his arm, running his fingers idly over the jewelled costume.

Suddenly the door opened and he turned to face Tongchai. His heart leaped as she walked towards him, a tentative smile on her lips, her eyes shining in the half-light.

"Tongchai!" In a moment she was wrapped in his arms and the scent of crushed mali filled his nostrils. "Why didn't you call?" he whispered.

"I think maybe you are angry," she replied. "I wait . . . it has been so long . . ."

Afterwards, lying across the divan, he reached for a cigarette and told her about his plans.

"You will leave the Army?" she asked, anxiously. "But what will you do then?"

"I'll get a job with one of the trading companies." She lit his cigarette and he stretched out across the divan, blowing smoke rings at the ceiling. "I can sell their silly appliances better than any knot-headed Kraut or Dutchman they've got now . . ."

"But must you leave the Army?"

He reached out and pulled her closer. "Let's not go over all that again! You said you didn't want to be an Army wife. And you're right. You won't have to be. I'll go to work for the East-West Company and we can stay right here."

She pulled away and sat looking at him. "But you like the Army very much. I think you would not be happy to be the . . . salesman."

He raised up on his elbow. "Christ almighty, Tongchai!" he said, with exasperation. "I don't understand you! First you said you didn't like the Army. All right. I'm going to quit! Now you don't want me to be in business. What else can I do?"

She put her arms around his neck and kissed him. "I am sorry, Jimmy," she said, softly. "I want you to be happy. Why can we not go on like this?"

"We've been over all that before!" he said, despairingly. "Don't you understand? People are talking about us . . . about my staying here . . ."

She pulled away from him, offended. "Maybe I should go away. Then everything will be all right."

"Go away?"

"To Saigon. The Ministry has the office in Saigon. They ask who wants to go . . ."

"Tongchai! How can you say things like that . . ."

She turned back to him, smiling. "I could not go to Saigon, Jimmy! I make the joke. But you must not be so unhappy. Please, you smile!" Lightly she passed her fingers over his lips. "Mai Ben Rai," she said, teasingly. He seized her fingers,

kissed the palm of her hand and then, carried away by the nearness of each other, their lips met in a prolonged kiss.

Later, Tongchai, half asleep, murmured, "You must not leave the Army until you have job with the trading company, Jimmy . . ."

"I talked with the East-West people yesterday," he said, drowsily. "They'll give me a job when I get the papers back from the Ministry. Said my Army contacts would help out. I've given Prasert all the forms, filled out. He'll handle them through the Ministry himself."

"And do not park the car on New Road any more," she added.

His arm tightened around her waist. He was happy. He knew things would work out. They had to !

36

Miss Patterson had not been herself since that fateful Sunday morning of the fair. The weeks had gone by and she had come to work each day dreading that something would happen. At the snack bar she avoided the private from the AG section. Once or twice she had passed him in the hallway and felt him staring at her, but so far as she knew, no gossip concerning the episode had come up.

What worried her most was the twix from Clark Field about Sergeant Davies. It had been in a pile of correspondence she was copying for the reading file and, in a moment of complete insanity, she had left out a line and inserted one word. The revised message indicated that there was no replacement for Davies in the Philippines. She would never know why she did it. She certainly didn't want the Sergeant around, in fact she was apprehensive of a chance encounter—or his deliberate appearance at her desk. She had had a wild idea that if the reading file indicated there was no replacement, the General might think of something else and before the mistake was

found, another arrangement might have been made and the Sergeant would have no need to carry out his implied threat.

But the General had questioned the twix and the mistake had been found out. After a dressing-down by the Adjutant, she had been transferred to Colonel White as his secretary and was driven to reading old files or figuring out household expenses and occasionally answering the Colonel's phone.

She was sitting at her desk, awaiting Colonel White's return from a conference, when a new AG mail clerk came upstairs with a handful of invitations.

"These are for Colonel White. You get them, don't you?" he asked.

"Those are for me," she said, with relief at having something to do.

One by one she opened the thick envelopes and extracted the invitations, entering them into a log book she had set up, patterned after Cooper's. There was an invitation to the opening of a new Thai play at the Silpakorn Theatre and another one to a cocktail party at First Division headquarters. Then she opened the next envelope, of the same heavy texture as those containing the invitations. This one, however, contained a personal note from Air Marshal Wicharn to Colonel White, referring to a conversation they had held concerning MAAG. It closed with a reference to their "happy future relationship." Realising that it had been mixed up with the invitations because of the envelope, and knowing that all incoming correspondence had to be copied for the reading file, she took the letter downstairs to the Navy section, where a Thermofax machine had recently been installed. The Thai operator obligingly made her a copy. She returned, dropped the tissue sheet in her drawer and proceeded to write up acceptances for the invitations.

When the Colonel returned, she gave him the correspondence. For once, she was pleased to note, he was in a genial mood. He even smiled. "Thanks, Peggy," he said. "Do any of the invitations conflict?"

"No sir. I've got the acceptances ready to send out."

"Thanks. Just hold them until I check with Mrs. . . .," and then he stopped. "Where did this come from?" he asked, holding the letter from Marshal Wicharn in his hand.

"Oh, that note? The mailroom delivered it. I guess they thought it was an invitation. I just went downstairs to the Navy . . ."

"Why did you open my personal mail?"

She looked at him to see if he were joking. "Sir, I've always opened all letters addressed to you . . ."

"Who else has seen this?" he demanded.

"Nobody. I merely opened it and when I saw that . . ."

"Goddamn it, Miss Patterson, I want you to keep your hands off my personal mail!"

She was dumbfounded when she realised he was serious. "Sir," she said, "I don't understand. Of course I won't open your mail if you don't want me to. But I had no way of knowing . . . and as social secretary I'm . . ."

His voice was bitter. "You are nothing of the sort, Miss Patterson! You can't take shorthand and you can't even type the reading file without messing it up. I don't know just what there is around here that you *can* do!"

His face was livid with anger. She had never seen him quite like this before. His lips were drawn down at the corners as though he couldn't quite control them. "Now that we're on the subject, there's something else I've been meaning to talk to you about. Please sit down!"

She sat down.

"Word has come to me, Miss Patterson," he said, swinging his chair around, "that you have been, shall we say, carrying on . . . with a certain sergeant in this command."

She felt the blood drain out of her face. "I don't think I understand . . ."

"Oh, I think you understand all right," he retorted. "It involves Sergeant Davies. Is that the reason you deliberately falsified that message from the Philippines? Isn't that carrying it a little too far?"

"Why, I . . . no . . . that isn't true!"

"It was a very stupid thing to do. Didn't you realise that you couldn't get away with it?"

She sat, numbed by the slashing attack. The sight of her pallid face seemed to drive the Colonel into a paroxysm of righteousness. "He's a married man! With five children. And his wife is pregnant!"

"Colonel," she said when she finally found her voice. "You haven't permitted me to say one word."

"Say it now!"

"It was during the fair. Sergeant Davies happened to be downtown. I didn't know him, never saw him before. He just happened to stop in. So did lots of other people. Captain Cooper was one of them."

"Did they also stay all night? Did their friends call for them in the morning?"

She was suddenly sick with anger. So it was the private, after all. Maybe Davies had put him up to telling about it.

"It seems to me," continued the Colonel, "with such a story going around, we can hardly keep you here."

She felt herself slipping into near-hysteria. "Sir, it's rather involved; I would like to explain . . ."

"What is there to explain, if it did happen? Did it?"

"No it didn't! Not the way you have it figured out!"

He continued as though she hadn't spoken. "Perhaps it would be best if the Civil Service people were asked to transfer you . . ."

"But I like it here in Bangkok. I've got a little house . . . and my contract says . . ."

"Let's say Japan or Okinawa," he continued.

"Then it will be on my record that . . ."

He looked at her closely. "Not necessarily. Not if you were to *ask* for a transfer . . ."

She was completely mixed up. She had never expected this. "And if I deny it?" she exclaimed. "I can demand an investigation!"

The Colonel sat back in his chair. Looking at her crumpled figure in the chair his anger seemed to subside and a paternal look came over his face. "First of all, Miss Patterson, I don't think you really want that. Second, I'm afraid that the mere fact that there is an investigation would be bad for you. It's a case of 'Caesar's wife' don't you see? I think a request for transfer is the answer."

She sat staring at him.

"I suggest," he said, "that you think the whole thing over. Find some place you'd like to go and put in a request to be transferred. No one need be the wiser. But it should be done right away."

He picked up Wicharn's letter and put it in his pocket. She rose, walked back to her desk, and then went to the ladies' room. She sat at the dressing table, trying to figure out exactly what had happened. So he *had* known. And oddly enough, hadn't mentioned it until he blew his stack over the letter. She remembered the copy was in her desk drawer—he hadn't given her a chance to tell him she had made a copy.

When she returned, the Colonel was gone. Slowly she opened the drawer and, without removing the letter, read it over again, her hand ready to slam the drawer shut should he reappear. When she had finished reading it, a grim smile spread over her plump face. No wonder he blew his stack! For one wild moment she thought of marching up to him and letting him know she understood the contents. But then she thought of a better idea. She'd put in for a transfer, if necessary. But she wouldn't be the only one leaving MAAG!

37

It took several weeks for Major Mannon to work out the details of the first guerrilla problem in the field. Although the rangers had played only a small role in the joint manoeuvre, their importance had been stressed at the final critique. As he

saw it, the training would have two main objectives, first, to develop ability to move in and around various villages and towns without arousing suspicion and, second, to teach the men to live in the jungle utilising the plants and animals for food and shelter.

His plan was to parachute two plane-loads of rangers, including himself, into the vicinity of the northern border. There the group would split into teams of three or four men, who, dressed in civilian clothes, would reconnoitre specified villages. Later they would move into the jungle and remain there for three or four days, living entirely on what they could find or catch. Then, assembling at a predesignated point, they would be flown back to Lampang.

He felt that they should be issued no ammunition, thus avoiding any incidents but, for the sake of realism, should carry hidden pistols. Each team would be equipped with a small radio to be used to keep in contact with the commander throughout the problem.

After working out the basic outline of the problem with Major Siri, Mannon took up the matter with Colonel Thom. He reacted with great interest. When the Major explained the details of the exercise he added a few subtleties of his own, among them a recommendation that local police and military not be notified of the problem until it was over, thus testing their ability to spot non-residents in the area.

Major Mannon had gradually developed a theory of guerilla warfare culled from his reading and his own thoughts, and he was in the process of putting it on paper. He worked each evening with no interruptions from Colonel Childs, who was evidently finding the supply situation under Sergeant Bayat to be a bigger problem than he had anticipated.

One morning at headquarters, Mannon was discussing some theoretical aspects of guerrilla warfare with Siri when Colonel Childs happened to come by. At dinner, Colonel Childs brought up the subject.

"What's this I heard you mention today to Siri about a paper you're writing, Mannon? Is it something for publication or are you giving it to the Thais, or what?"

"It's just a few ideas I've been toying with. It started as a one-paragraph introduction to the problem and just expanded as I thought more about it. Nothing to do with MAAG."

"Then how does Siri know about it?"

"He asked me a few questions one day when I was working on it. That's all."

"Evidently he's interested. He said something to me about wanting to show the finished paper to Thom."

"He was joking. I guess he liked some of the ideas. I explained to him that nothing I say or write has any validity so far as this organisation is concerned."

"I'm glad to hear that," said the Colonel. "The Army has plenty of writers who can formulate theories of warfare. If you have any more thoughts on the subject I'd like to see them before they get into Thai channels."

Major Mannon, remembering Childs' complete disinterest in the subject heretofore, felt his collar tighten. "I take it, Colonel, that you object to my discussions with the Thais even though they pertain to what we're teaching them?"

"There is no point in twisting my words around," said Childs with icy calm. "I'm not referring to discussions, god-damnit! I'm talking about articles. Writing. That I don't know about."

"Yes sir." Mannon did not trust himself to speak further but finished his canned peaches and left the table.

Colonel Childs called after him. "Now that it's got this far, I'd like to see a copy of the paper."

"Yes, sir," came from the bedroom.

A short while later, Childs watched Mannon go downstairs dressed for riding. Why, he asked himself, must I be afflicted with an eager beaver? Why can't he act like any normal officer—do his work every day and come home and read a magazine or have a drink or something and forget about the

goddamned theories, the goddamned guerrillas . . . and the goddamned horses !

The next morning, a typed copy of the guerrilla-warfare article was on Childs' desk. Even a preliminary leafing through the pages disturbed him. He had assumed it would be amateurish enough to be dismissed with no comment. Now he wasn't so sure. In fact, he was concerned enough to write a note to Hawley and attach it to the article for forwarding in the next despatch to Bangkok. If Hawley liked it, he figured, there was no reason why Lampang MAAG shouldn't get the credit. If he didn't like it, then there was no reason why Mannon should be spared the knowledge. His note stated that the article had been prepared in the Lampang office and was being forwarded for approval.

When the paper arrived in Colonel Hawley's office two days later, the Colonel, being very busy, scanned it and sent it forward to Colonel White who, after glancing through it, bucked it into the General's office with a "For your comment."

Thus it reached the General's "In" basket and, for the first time since it left Mannon's hands, was actually read, the General spending a half-hour going over it in detail.

The crux of the presentation, he found, was that guerrilla warfare in Thailand would be effective only if conducted in conjunction with regular forces, supplied and directed by a central headquarters and set up *in advance* of actual hostilities. Mannon's thesis further stated that strategy and a certain amount of tactics must be planned by the central headquarters, with a large measure of initiative assigned to local subordinate commanders.

The article ended with a reminder that discipline must be stressed and indoctrination should be thorough since guerrilla warfare was, fundamentally, ideology.

The General called for Hawley. "Have you had a chance to read this?" he asked, handing the paper to the Colonel and motioning for him and Cooper to be seated.

Hawley identified it and handed it back. "Yes, sir. Hurriedly, I'll admit, but I think I know what Mannon is talking about."

"Mannon? This paper came from Lampang but there's no author mentioned."

"Sir, it couldn't possibly have been written by Childs."

"I suppose you're right. What do you think of it?"

The Colonel hesitated, studying his gaunt fingers. "Sir," he began, "you put me in a difficult position. The only way I can discuss that paper is by bringing up a subject which . . . you don't like."

"What are you talking about?"

Hawley glanced at Cooper with a "see what I mean" look . . . "I mean politics, sir," he said firmly.

"What do politics have to do with this particular study?"

Hawley looked at the General for a moment. "Sir, with your permission, I'd like to say something which I think you should know." There was something about his stolid demeanour and steady gaze which Cooper saw had caught the General's attention.

"Go ahead."

"First of all, sir, I believe you are correct in your insistence that MAAG and politics be kept apart. For the men stationed up-country and the small-unit advisers I think it's a good idea. But for senior advisers, such a course is impossible. We can't discuss anything of any importance without politics entering in somewhere. I've heard you castigate the others so I've never mentioned it. Which means that sometimes you haven't been given the full picture."

He paused and looked at the General, who sat listening without comment. When the General nodded he continued. "Before you came here, it was a requirement that we get along with the Thais no matter what. Any time a Thai commander asked us for something, even though it was understood that his request was tied in with the balance of power, we put through his request. When you came, all that tacitly changed. But now,

when we try to explain some of these requests—which still come in—you cut us off. So, in a sense, we're back where we started."

The General continued to sit, motionless. Cooper couldn't tell whether he was building up to a verbal blast or simply listening.

"Lately," continued Hawley, "the Thais have accepted our guidance to a degree I can't remember seeing before. I presume it is because of the way things are handled at the top level between you and the Prime Minister. But training for guerrilla warfare in Thailand is almost pure politics. I find, from some of my own sources, that the Prime Minister has backed you up in this area despite rumoured objections from the other Services..."

"What does the Air Force and Navy have to do with it?" snapped the General.

"Sir, I refer to them as supporters of the régime, not as military commanders. It's just that they think this will give the Army too much of an advantage. You suggested that the Army's tanks and artillery be moved out of Bangkok. Shortly after that, Air Marshal Wicharn requested some Air Force regiments to be trained as infantry. Since the regiments would be close by the city, it was obviously a move to fill the political vacuum. Then there's the question of Marines. Before you got here, they had been dispersed, but handy. Now the question of keeping them is out in the open."

"I assume a certain amount of this is hearsay," said the General.

"Sir, I have personally seen a memo from Marshal Chit, directing that Army artillery and tanks would, under no circumstances, be moved out of Bangkok at this time!"

The Colonel had finished and sat waiting for the General's comments. His tall, spare figure was motionless and his eyes, behind the glasses, were calm. Cooper saw in him a man who had relieved his mind of a nagging problem and was ready to face whatever consequences followed.

"Politics!" snorted the General after a moment. But something in his voice indicated that the Colonel had made his point.

"Sir," added Hawley in afterthought, "I was here during one of the coups. It only took a few hours. Troops moved in, seized the post office—that's where the radio station is located—and Government House and a few key personnel. That's all there was to it. I'm not saying that one will occur again but the possibility is always present."

The General looked at Hawley for a few moments and then changed the subject. "Do you think Mannon's theory has validity?"

"Yes sir, I do. Especially the suggestion that a large part of the Army should be trained as guerrillas."

"Do you think that would be a good idea?"

"Yes, sir."

"Why?"

The Colonel started to reach for a cigarette but stopped when he saw no ashtray on the desk. "Because we talk about the Thais being the only people in Southeast Asia who have never been a colony and we assume they would, therefore, put up a stiff fight to preserve their freedom. But, so far as I can see, this MAAG is no different from the ones in the other countries. We send them guns and tanks and planes. And what happens? They use them to strengthen the current régime!"

"There's a psychological advantage in modern equipment," said the General. "Every tank and gun that comes across the dock is one more thing for the Commies to reckon with. No soldier, I don't care who he is, can just disregard aeroplanes and tanks and quad fifties!"

"Of course not," replied the Colonel, "but I mean that this paper spells out the ideas you've advocated . . . lighter guns, mortars, horses . . . in other words, adopts a kind of warfare suitable to the country. It's a good idea. But all this paper will do is stir up Thai Air Force and Navy commanders. So why don't we simply go ahead and work on the idea without writing about it?"

The General was silent for a moment. "I think it is well written," he said, "and at least deserves more study. Hawley, drop a note to whoever wrote it and tell him we appreciate his interest. Tell him its scope is beyond the units in the field so we'd prefer to keep it at this level."

Hawley left the office. He was busy that day and had time to dash off only a brief note to Colonel Childs. It read :

This HQ appreciates interest shown in subject. Retaining paper. Not suitable for dissemination to Thais at your HQ.

A few days later Colonel Childs was to take a certain amount of satisfaction in tossing the note on Mannon's desk.

Later that evening, the General and his wife, sitting in their upstairs living room, were discussing invitations for the ensuing week. The question came up concerning the exact hour of one of the cocktail parties.

"I'll get Cooper," said the General. "He always remembers these things."

He called the hotel but there was no answer to Cooper's room. Later in the evening he called again but there was still no answer.

"I wonder what he does with his nights anyhow!" he said, annoyed at the repeated buzzing.

"Never mind, Ed," said Mrs. Mason, "I can call him tomorrow at the office."

"Ought to be home in bed, getting his sleep!"

Mrs. Mason sat thinking for a moment and then she put down her book. "Ed," she began, "I hate to bring up the subject because I know how you feel about it. But Cooper's got a problem right now . . ."

"What possible problem can a bachelor in Thailand have?"

Mrs. Mason smiled. "The one possible problem a bachelor in Thailand can have. Women."

"What do you mean?"

"It's that Thai girl. He wants to marry her."

The General put down his glass. "Now, Eleanor, how can you possibly know that? It's just like a woman to start right in . . ."

"Ed, he talked to me about it. It's the same girl he's known ever since we got here. The one who guided the Senators around on that tour."

"You mean Hong Kong, or whatever her name is?"

"Tongchai. And he's serious. I tried to tell him what it would mean to his career, but I don't think it registered."

"Do you suppose she's pregnant? If he's got himself mixed up in something like that . . ."

"I don't think so, Ed. I didn't get that impression at all . . ."

"Well, goddamn it! I don't want a married aide. If he wants to get married, that's his own business but somebody had better put him wise to some facts of life. It's probably just a whim—romantic Bangkok and all that nonsense. I think I'd better talk to him tomorrow myself."

"I wish you would, Ed, but don't be too rough on him. That's all he needs to just push him over the edge."

The next morning, when Cooper was putting correspondence in the "In" basket, General Mason asked him to sit down.

"Jim, I haven't had a chance to ask you about your life here in Bangkok. How are things going? Are you satisfied at the Chakri Hotel?"

"Yes, sir," replied Cooper, warily. The General had never before expressed any particular interest in his personal life and he was sure it involved Tongchai.

"Is everything satisfactory? I mean, do you have any problems?"

"No sir. Not particularly."

The General looked at his aide for a moment and then went on. "I suppose you're wondering what brought up this subject . . ." He was obviously embarrassed. "It's because I understand that . . . you're still interested in that Thai girl . . ."

Cooper felt it was time for him to speak out. "Sir," he said, "I don't quite know how to say this. But it's been on my mind for a long time. I appreciate everything that's happened since I've been here . . ."

He hesitated for a moment and the General said, "What are you trying to say?"

"Sir, I . . . I am thinking about resigning from the Army."

General Mason sat back in silence. Then he said, "Would you mind telling me what brought this about?"

"It involves Tongchai, the Thai girl. She doesn't like the Army. And, well, rather than lose her, I'd . . . I figure I could work downtown in one of the trading companies . . ."

The General looked at him for a moment. "Are you saying that you want to quit the Army to work in Bangkok as a civilian? A salesman?"

Cooper nodded. Coming from the General, the idea suddenly sounded quite idiotic. The General shook his head, as though he didn't quite believe what he was hearing. "Why can't you just get married and stay in the Army?"

"As I said, sir, she doesn't like it. She doesn't want any part of it."

"That's one hell of an attitude for a wife to take, isn't it? She can't think very much of you if she's not willing to accept your way of life."

"Sir, she's Thai. And they feel differently about the Army than we do. Some of them . . . don't like it."

"You can't be serious! Give up everything you've worked for all these years? For a Thai? You'd better think about that one again, Cooper. You've been my aide and a damned good one. You've got a fine career ahead of you and now you're going to throw it away . . . for some girl. I suppose it's my fault, in a way, bringing you over here at all. Have you talked to anybody else about this?"

"Only Mrs. Mason. I just mentioned about getting married . . ."

"Eleanor knows about this?"

"Not about my leaving the Army. Just about being married."

"And what did she say?"

"She didn't approve."

"Good for her! You'd do well to listen to Eleanor. I agree with her. Now look here, Jim. You've been carried away, that's all, and I want you to consider the whole thing very carefully. You and I have been together quite a while now and I know you better than you think. You're not cut out for a civilian. And you would be very unhappy as a salesman. You've got some romantic notion in your head about Bangkok, that's all. Perhaps White was right. I should have had you move in with Eleanor and me. Thailand is beautiful and the Thai girls are dolls . . . I know that as well as anybody else. But you've got to give this some thought . . ."

"Sir, I have thought about it. I . . ."

"I haven't finished! I don't want you making any snap decisions. Have you talked with any of these . . . companies?"

"The East-West. They handle household appliances. All I need is a clearance from the Ministry of Commerce . . . and they said they'd take me on."

"Because you're in the Army. They'll expect you to peddle their stuff to the Army people you know. And when that's done, they'll just drop you. You said you needed a clearance from Commerce? That's Marshal Wicharn, isn't it?"

Cooper nodded and the General sat looking at his desk blotter, twisting a pencil in his hand. "Have you talked with the Commerce people yet?"

"I haven't. A Thai friend of mine is putting the request through."

The General tossed the pencil on the desk and clasped his hands. "I can't tell you how disappointed I am about all this. I wish you'd come to me first. I can't stop you from resigning. But I sure as hell would have sent you home if I had suspected anything like this was going on. You're making the biggest mistake of your life. I don't care who the hell this girl

is, no woman is worth what you're doing. All I can do is send back for another aide, but you'll have to carry on for the time being. We can't spare anybody from the headquarters right now to take over from you.

"Jim, I want you to think about this some more. When you come to your senses, if it isn't too late, I want to know it. A man can make a mistake, you know—everybody does once in a while—but Christ almighty! they don't just throw their whole life away!"

Looking at his aide he saw he was making no particular impression.

"All right, Jim," he sighed. "That's all. Let's go on as usual for the time being. But I want you to give the matter a lot of serious thought, before it's too late."

"Yes, sir."

38

The guerrilla problem got under way when two planes, carrying a total of twenty paratroopers from the guerrilla school, plus Major Mannon and Colonel Thom, took off from Lampang for the two-hour flight to the northern border. Their drop zone was to be a little air strip, built during World War II, between the border towns of Mong San and Mong Rai.

Colonel Thom was not going to jump. He had gone along because, behind his brusque manner, he genuinely liked Major Mannon and wanted to support him; too, the Thai had an intense interest in the project. He had considered jumping with the trainees but, as Commandant, he could not permit himself to remain away from the post. He envied Mannon his freedom from the responsibilities of command.

The Thai soldiers involved in the operation were tremendously impressed at the sight of the short, husky man seated near the door. Most of them had never before seen their Commandant at close quarters. His presence lent an added air of importance to the exercise.

They got to their feet and hooked up as the plane neared the town of Mong San and then, with the narrow oblong slash in the jungle just beneath them, the signal light changed from red to green. Major Mannon, followed by the rest of the stick, went out of the door. Colonel Thom, braced in the doorway of the suddenly empty plane could see the tiny figures swaying towards the ground. From his vantage point, it appeared to have been a good jump. He watched until both planeloads neared the ground, whereupon he resumed his seat and the plane, making a wide arc, headed back for Lampang.

Mannon had timed the jump so that they could get organised in the last light of day; their first problem was scheduled to start in the early hours of darkness. The troopers came trudging up to him, covered with dust from the landing, each one carrying his chute on his shoulder. After roll call by Sergeant Chai, they expended the tension built up during the jump by a few moments of rapid-fire conversation. Then they fell in and moved off to a clump of woods near the road to Mong San. This was designated as their headquarters where they would reassemble the following afternoon.

One of the chutes was suspended from a tree limb to form a tent for Mannon, Chai and the radio operator, who would remain behind to monitor radio reports of their progress while they reconnoitred the various nearby towns.

A fire was lighted to heat rations and they crouched around it, a little group, alone in the vast, strange darkness, with the Burmese hills faintly visible to the northwest and the jungles of Laos far to the north. Digging into his rations with a plastic spoon and drinking tepid canteen water, Mannon felt happier than he had in a long time. One by one the stars came out and he could see the quick, eager eyes of the small Thai troopers occasionally looking at him with shy smiles. He knew that these men had a very firm belief in ghosts and night spirits and he realised that their faith in him was strong enough to keep them at bay.

After they had rested a short time, Sergeant Chai desig-

nated the five teams of four men each and Mannon discussed the night's problem, Chai interpreting.

"Each man has a compass and watch," he reminded them, "and each team has a radio. Change into civilian clothes and then hide the radio in a pack or bundle. You will go to your individual town by any means you like. You can walk or take a bus or hitch a ride. It's the festival season so people will be moving around later than usual. It should be easy to pass as visitors.

"Keep track of your location at all times. Pretend that the town has been seized by invaders and you are guerrillas trying to find out what is going on. Draw a sketch map showing the location of the post office, police boxes, school, anything else of military interest. Report back by radio each hour. Don't tell anyone who you are unless, of course, the police pick you up and ask you. Be back here at this spot not later than tomorrow noon and we'll move south into the jungle for the next part of the problem."

When the men were ready to depart, Mannon shook their hands. It was a simple gesture but it took on a special significance in the vast darkness around them. Mannon had intended to accompany one of the teams, but as Thom had pointed out, his presence would give them away.

When the last man had gone, Mannon, Sergeant Chai and the radio operator seated themselves around the set and turned out the lantern to save fuel. The moon was starting to come up and Mannon, smoking a cigarette, remembered how often he had sat like this, waiting for a message from a patrol, in the Korean hills.

In about an hour, the low hum of the radio was interrupted by the voice of one of the team members. He was at Mong Rai, a border town about five miles away. As predicted, a small fair was in progress and the team was having no difficulty with its mission.

Soon messages had been received from the other teams with the exception of the one in the nearby village of Mong San.

Mannon was becoming concerned when he heard their call sign and Sergeant Chai grabbed a pad and began copying their message. Seeing him reach for a second sheet of paper, Mannon looked over his shoulder. "What is it all about?" he asked.

"Wait, please," said the Sergeant, still busy scribbling. "Very interesting." Finally he turned to Mannon. "Sah," he said, "very unusual. Corporal Hain from Mong San team say that team go past schoolhouse. No light. But man is in front. So they go around back and look in window. Meeting going on. Many people inside. Man talking about Pridi. What shall they do?"

"About Pridi?"

"Yes, sah."

"Don't they know what kind of a meeting it is?"

"No, sah. Very funny. They do not know what to do."

"Pridi! Maybe it's a USIS lecture. You know, American Embassy talk about Communists."

"No, sah. No Embassy talk. No lights. No loudspeaker. Just people in schoolhouse."

"Okay. Say, Sergeant, this looks interesting. Probably nothing at all, but you get them back on the radio, find out where the schoolhouse is and say you and I will be there right away. Have them stick around—out of sight."

In a few moments, Mannon and the Sergeant were on their way towards Mong San. They arrived at the crossroads where the airfield track met the paved east-west river road and the Sergeant pointed to the left. Continuing on down the road they passed a row of Thai houses whose occupants were either asleep or at the fair and they attracted no attention except for the growling of a few dogs. Beyond a stand of banana trees they glimpsed the front of a wooden building facing a wide lawn with a flagpole in the centre. It appeared deserted in the moonlight but suddenly Mannon felt a sharp tug at his sleeve and the Sergeant pulled him into the shadows.

"What the hell is . . ."

The Sergeant put his finger to his lips and pointed. Stand-

ing almost hidden in the shadows of the entrance way was a lone figure. It appeared to be a farmer, heavy-set and squat, but there was something about the motionless form that sent a sudden chill up Mannon's spine.

Mannon tapped Chai on the shoulder and quietly they proceeded to move through the trees towards the rear of the building, skirting the moonlit lawn. They were behind the schoolhouse when a sibilant whisper stopped them in their tracks and the Thai team chief stepped from behind a banana tree. Without speaking, he led them towards the building. Fortunately, it was only one story high and was elevated a few feet from the ground. The team chief pointed to one of the open windows where the barest flicker of a light was seen. Quietly they advanced until they were standing underneath it. Mannon signalled to the two Thais and they hoisted him up until he could just peer inside. There he saw about fifteen men, squatting around a paraffin lantern. Their backs were towards the window and they were listening with close attention to a man talking in a low, intense voice. The speaker, with the light of the lantern in his eyes, evidently could not see the window and his listeners were too absorbed in what he was saying to pay very much attention to anything else.

Mannon, after watching them for a few moments, signalled for the two Thais to lower him to the ground. Then he gestured to Chai and he and the team chief hoisted the Sergeant up to the window and held him there, listening. Their arms were beginning to ache before he finally indicated he wanted to be let down. He motioned for them to move away from the window.

"Listen, sah," he whispered when they had reached the trees. "This very bad. Man from Hunan, China. He say Free Thais will come across Mekong River very soon. Pridi will come with them and they make Thailand into a free country."

"Pridi! What else did he say?"

"Cannot understand very good. Shan country talk."

"Get back up there and listen some more!"

Once more they lifted the Sergeant up to the window. As

they stood holding him, the other men on the team, who had been hidden in the darkness, slowly crept closer to find out what was going on. One of them stepped on a dry banana stalk and the crack sounded like a pistol shot in the stillness of the night. The Sergeant made a violent movement and they dropped him to the ground. "We go! Quick!" he whispered. They ducked away from the window and all of them double-timed into the woods. They could hear sounds of scuffling in the room and the lantern was suddenly raised up in the window.

Mannon and his troopers kept going until, about five minutes later, the Sergeant signalled for them to stop.

"I think all right now," he said. "But better we go back to air strip right away." Nothing more was said until they were on the dirt road leading to the rendezvous area. Mannon asked what had happened.

"They hear noise outside. Everybody jump up."

"Okay. Now, what was the guy talking about?"

"This very bad. Man say in one, maybe two weeks, many Free Thais in Mong San and Mong Rai they . . . take over. Then no more taxes, no more police, no more soldiers. Thai people will be free."

"Now wait a minute. I want to get this straight. He said in one week or maybe two, people who are in Mong San and Mong Rai right now will take them over?"

The Sergeant nodded. "Yes, sah. Then he say after takeover many soldiers will come across river and pretty soon whole country will be free. No more Prime Minister. Pridi will come back."

"When did he say the many soldiers would cross the river?"

"He not say. But they come to Mong San and Mong Rai pretty soon."

"Any other places?"

"No, sah. He say only Mong Rai, Mong San."

"And he didn't say when?"

"No, sah. He say they come and kill Thai soldiers and everyone will be free."

"Who were the people listening to him? Could you tell? Did they look like soldiers or farmers, or what?"

"Some look like farmers."

"Did any of them look like policemen or soldiers?"

"I do not know, sah. Could not tell."

"Can you remember anything else?"

"Man say he go to Mong Rai tomorrow."

"Where in Mong Rai?"

"He no say."

Back at the rendezvous area Mannon sat down under a tree. The guerrilla problem had suddenly taken on a different aspect. He felt that the information they had stumbled upon should be forwarded to Bangkok immediately. But his field radio couldn't even reach Chiang Mai. And there was a three-day interval before he would be back in Lampang. He was still uncertain what significance should be attached to what they had overheard in the schoolroom. Was it the work of some crackpot? Or had his men, by the wildest chance, happened upon the most momentous piece of information for Thailand since World War II?

And why had Colonel Thom suggested that they not tell the local authorities about the exercise? Could it be that he suspected something like this? Was that why he had wanted to come along with them?

There was the problem of his own men, scattered over the area. He realised now that they were in actual danger. Spotted by the infiltrators, they would be killed as government spies. Found by the local police they would be jailed or maybe shot as infiltrators! He considered whether or not he should radio all of them to report back immediately to the rendezvous area but, on second thought, he decided against it. Precipitous movement right now might prove more dangerous for them than remaining where they were. Mannon instructed the Mong San team to roll up in their chutes for the rest of the night. He called Sergeant Chai into the tent and the two of them in low voices, went over what Chai had heard. The more

they discussed the meeting in the schoolhouse, the more Mannon became convinced that they had uncovered vital information. For years, according to Major Siri, there had been rumours that Pridi was working with exiled Thais in Burma, Laos and China, putting together a movement that would get him back into power. The extent and the timing of the Free Thai movement had never been known for sure. This would appear to be the first real information on it. Mannon considered contacting the Thai Army units in Mong San and Mong Rai. But suppose they were part of the plot? No, he concluded, better report to Bangkok and let MAAG handle the situation.

He decided that when the men reassembled in the morning, he would send them off to continue with the jungle problem. He would get to Chiang Mai somehow and radio a message through the MAAG team to Bangkok. Then he could rejoin the guerrilla group.

But one thing still remained. The date of the river crossing at the two towns. Chai didn't hear that detail. What made it so maddening was that he probably would have heard it in about sixty seconds more. But the speaker said he'd be in Mong Rai tomorrow. There was just a wild chance that they might pull off the same eavesdropping trick. Tomorrow night, he decided, he and Sergeant Chai would try it.

"Chai," he said, "you and I are going to Mong Rai."

The Sergeant smiled. "I know you would say that, sah," he answered. "We can send team in jungle with Sergeant Harn."

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By noon the next day the balance of the party had returned to the rendezvous area, each group with a sketch map and a log of what they had observed.

Mannon went over their notes carefully, compared sketch maps, and questioned the men closely. None of them had

noticed anything out of the ordinary. Mannon interrogated those who had been to Mong Rai at great length. Yes, they had observed the school, the post office and the temple, but there was nothing to report.

Then Mannon explained that something very important had come up. The operation would proceed as planned except that he and Sergeant Chai would join them the following day.

He saw the looks of disappointment and could sense the Thais' fight to ignore the suspicion that maybe he was just a blowhard like all the rest and that he and the Sergeant had decided to have a spree at the Mong Rai fair. This was hard to face.

After advising them to get some rest he and Chai sat down to do some planning. They decided that nothing would be gained by walking to Mong Rai and they might as well take the bus. They planned to arrive in the village around supper-time. Mannon, to avoid being conspicuous, would remain at the town's one hotel (which reportedly had a bar) while the Sergeant toured the area to see if he could locate the meeting place. It was an improbable manoeuvre but they had to chance it.

Late that afternoon the men readied their gear and Sergeant Harn took command. A man had been dispatched to the local police station for a jeep and trailer to collect the parachutes for subsequent return to the Army. Mannon was curious to know if the police had heard of the drop. The jeep driver said they had received one report on suspicious characters but it had come from a farmer known for his overconsumption of Mekong, so they had ignored it.

Mannon felt a twinge of regret as he saw the men quietly packing up their equipment and preparing to move. Sergeant Chai, stepping up beside him, said, "Sah, never mind. Later they will understand . . ."

After the men had left, Mannon and Chai walked the lane down to the highway and waited about twenty minutes when the Mong Rai bus came careening along. It was a homemade

wooden box on an old truck chassis, filled with Thais on their way to the fair. Their fellow passengers included young men with duck-tailed haircuts and plastic pens in their shirt pockets, young girls with sunglasses, old women with close-cropped white hair, several Buddhist priests like saffron-winged birds and an old Thai with a crate of uneasy chickens.

With all the stops, it took almost an hour before the bus finally reached Mong Rai. Its one main street was lined with one- and two-story wooden shacks, most of which housed stores open tonight on account of the fair and displaying their wares—brooms, bright cotton cloth, cooking pots, patent medicines and Coca-Cola.

The one hotel in town, called the Electric Hotel, a wooden structure, badly in need of paint, had a small lobby opening on to a patio in the rear. A large sign, in English, hung over the registration desk, succinctly reminded the patrons . . . "No Whores Allowed."

The bar was a small cubicle, painted a poisonous green, the walls enlivened by several Chinese calendars featuring girls who looked exactly like Lana Turner except for their oblique eyes. Beyond the bar were several Coca-Cola posters and a framed picture of the King, its ornate gilt frame heavily fly-specked.

Mannon and Sergeant Chai sat at one of the wooden tables with twisted wire legs that Mannon remembered seeing in drugstores when he was a child. The bartender, at their request, brought a bottle of bourbon and a pitcher of water over to the table.

Mannon's watch showed six-fifteen and Chai was anxious to get started. He hurriedly gulped down his drink and left, promising to be back within an hour if unable to find the meeting place. Mannon picked up his glass, wondering how he could while away the next hour in this forsaken place. Here, in the shabby bar, their espionage plan looked more ridiculous than ever. To try to outguess a band of wily conspirators about the location of a secret meeting, to attempt to overhear one

phrase which, if true, would be the most heavily guarded secret in Southeast Asia, took on the aspects of lunacy.

As Mannon ruminated over his drink, a figure passed by the window and in a moment reappeared in the doorway of the bar. At closer range he saw a middle-aged Caucasian wearing a faded polo shirt. Although the man was thin, he had a small paunch and his trousers hung loosely from his belt, suggesting he had once been much stouter. He was partially bald and his face was heavily lined. There was something blurry and alcoholic about his faded blue eyes. He could have been any age between forty and sixty. "Hello, there," he called out to Mannon who, annoyed at having been caught staring, nodded his head.

The man came over to the table. "Pardon me," he said, "you're new here, huh?"

Mannon nodded again, wondering just how to get rid of him.

"Sorry," said the man, noting his look, "I didn't mean ta bother ya."

Mannon felt suddenly guilty. "I'm sorry," he said, briefly.

The man looked around the empty bar-room. "Mind if I sit down?"

Mannon silently indicated the seat opposite him at the table. The man signalled the bartender, who immediately brought a bottle of Mckong and a glass.

"I'm MacEldowney," said the man, pouring himself a drink. "Alex MacEldowney. People around here all call me Mac."

"Do you live here?" asked Mannon incredulously.

"More'n fifteen years," he answered with almost a touch of pride. "You here for long?"

"No. Not for long," said Mannon, glancing at his watch.

"I own the Thai Fabric Company," MacEldowney announced. The manner in which he proceeded to toss off a straight shot of Mekong explained his blurry expression and greyish complexion.

Mannon nodded, wondering how Sergeant Chai was making out on his search. "Must be kind of lonesome up here," he said, finally, resolving to be at least polite.

The man looked at him for a moment, evidently organising his thoughts. "Ya get used ta bein' lonely," he said simply.

Mannon realised he was talking to one of the strange breed of men who had always intrigued him. He had encountered them throughout the East . . . in Aden, or Rabat, Singapore or Port Sudan . . . solitary characters, usually Irishmen, who moved, alone and yet somehow not lonely, amidst the pageantry and squalor of some exotic culture. They were not remittance men and there was no tinge of spurious romanticism about them but rather the tough resourcefulness of men who could create a world of their own. He had often wondered what dream or fantasy had lured them so far from their homes and what secret fulfilment they experienced that could keep them there.

"I suppose your business keeps you busy," said Mannon, wondering why the hell he was bothering to talk with this rummy.

"Come here during World War II," said the man, settling back in his chair, "with the OSS boys."

"What happened?" asked Mannon politely, realising as he spoke that the remark had all the earmarks of a crack.

The man, however, didn't seem to notice. "Well, fer one thing, I fell in love."

Mannon tried to keep from showing his reaction at the thought of this repulsive man in love . . . it was almost indecent.

"I guess I've known love that very few guys have been lucky enough ta know," he declared with vehemence.

Mannon could hardly believe his ears. He was beginning to think something was wrong with the bourbon.

"Yea . . . I give up everything fer love," the man continued, solemnly. "But I done right, don't ya think? That's the thing ta do, if ya ever have the choice, huh?"

Mannon nodded, thinking of the Thai women of Mong Rai—flat-faced Hans, nothing like the golden girls of Bangkok.

The man poured himself another drink. "Met a local gal. Beautiful. And she was nuts about me. O' course in those days I cut quite a figger myself." He smiled, and for a moment his raddled features caricatured the bold, handsome face which Mannon realised had existed before dissipation and age had taken their toll. The Major put down his glass and began to listen.

"When the war was over," MacEldowney continued, "I sorta . . . hung around. Got interested in the silk business. In those days ya could get raw silk from China real cheap. And labour up here was practically free. There was a good market in Bangkok. Well, we got married. Had a kid. Beautiful girl. Looks like her mother. After a coupla years I wanted ta get home fer a visit. Oregon. One day I ups and says 'I'm goin' home ta see my folks a while.' Well, the Old Lady ain't buyin' one goddamned bit of that. And we have one hell of a argument."

Mannon nodded, wondering how Sergeant Chai was making out.

"I left her," continued MacEldowney, "and went down ta Bangkok. Figgered I owed myself a week in the bright lights. But in two days I took sick. Real bad. Ended up in a hospital. Couldn't eat, couldn't sleep, terrible pains in my stomach. Doctors give up. Finally an old Thai sawbones looks me over and asks am I married to a Thai? And do I live up north. Then he says 'She didn't want ya ta go?' I told him that's right. Well, ya won't believe me when I tell ya what he said . . ."

"What was wrong? Malaria?"

"'If ya wanta stay alive, ya better get back up there, right away.' That's what he tole me. 'Tonight,' he said."

Mannon poured himself another drink. "I suppose you went back . . ."

"Dragged myself back on the next train. Ya know why?"

The Doc explained it. These hill people up here got some kinda drug they give ya, in yer food, every day. And they give ya the antidote with it, see, so you don't notice it. But if ya go without the antidote for a coupla days, the drug takes effect."

"Good Jesus! You mean it's poison?"

"Absolutely! Kill ya deader'n' hell! So I come back and in two days I'm good as new! Been here ever since."

Mannon sat looking at MacEldowney, who proceeded to pour himself another Mekong, after which he raised the glass and drained it. "You just tell me how many guys' wives would do a thing like that ta keep 'em from leavin'!" he said, with a touch of pride. "That's what they'll do fer a real man! These Thais!! . . ." and he scornfully held up his thumb and forefinger, about an inch apart.

Slowly Mannon turned his glass around in his hands, smiling wryly at the thought that possibly he had been wrong about those men he had seen in the great seaports of the world. Maybe they were held in thrall not because of boyhood dreams or romantic visions of the East but simply because nature had endowed them with an extra inch of manhood.

"My wife's dead now," MacEldowney was saying. "I figure it's about time fer me and my daughter to pull the hell outa here anyhow."

"Why?" asked Mannon, suddenly interested.

The man's eyes were suddenly wary. "Who are you?"

"I'm from MAAG. I'm here to check on subversive activity . . . Free Thais planning to take over the government."

"You ain't from the Narcotic Bureau in Bangkok?" asked the man. All the fuzziness was gone from his face and his eyes were penetrating.

"Hell no," said Mannon. "I told you. I am from the MAAG."

"Then listen," said MacEldowney and he took Mannon's wrist in one of his thin hands. "Do the Thais listen ta you people? Or are ya just a buncha patsies they play around with?"

"I don't know what you mean . . ."

"All right. Let me tell ya somethin'. These people across the river have been getting ready ta come over here fer years. Don't ever kid yerself on that, buddy. They done it in China and now they're workin' on these people. But nobody gives a goddamn! Nobody! So I'm gettin' out!"

"But that's why I'm up here. I want to find out about all this. I understand that some of these subversives are having a meeting of some kind around here tonight. I want to know where . . ."

"Meetin's? Hell, they have 'em all the time."

"There's a special one tonight . . ."

The old man lowered his voice. "If ya were ta find out that they had a meetin', what would ya do?"

"Get into it, somehow, and find out what the hell is being planned."

"And then?"

"I would go back to Bangkok."

"Ya mean that buncha gangsters in Bangkok would do somethin' about it?"

"Yes, they would."

The man chuckled. "And all along I thought maybe you was one of them bastards from the Narcotic Bureau . . ."

"I don't understand what narcotics have to do with all this . . ."

"Because . . . well, hell, this would haveta be in confidence . . ."

"It will be."

The man lowered his voice and looked around. "It's like this. A lotta people don't understand the Orientals. Now back home you and me we take a drinka whiskey and let it go at that. They don't. They rather smoke. A nice, sociable smoke, if ya know what I mean."

Mannon nodded slowly. "I think I do."

"So, why should you and I argue about it? If that's what they want, and it makes 'em happy, the hell with it! Right?"

Mannon nodded again, wishing the man would stick to the subject at hand.

MacEldowney gave him a conspiratorial wink. "I think we understand each other. Mind you, I'm not talkin' about hasheesh . . . that's bad. Never touch hasheesh . . . it's poison ! That's my motto !"

"I'm sure it is," said Mannon. "You were saying something about . . ."

"Oh, yes. Them hill tribes around here. I meet a lot of 'em in my business. They know what's goin' on. They know that somethin' is gonna happen . . . and pretty soon."

"That's what I want to find out."

"Look," said the man, "I don't wanna get mixed up in politics. I got a reputation ta think about. But you wanted ta know if there's a meetin' tonight? I don't know. But if they was havin' an important one, I know where it would be."

"Where?"

Again the man glanced around and then leaned forward. "There's an old Cambodian temple a quarter mile east of here," he said, pointing. "I think that's the headquarters for all these wetbacks. But you better watch yer step or you'll find yer balls hanging on a forked stick tomorrow morning as a warning . . ."

Mannon looked at the time. The hour had been up about fifteen minutes before and Sergeant Chai wasn't back. The man, seeing him glance at his watch, stood up. "I gotta be goin'," he said, "because I don't wanna get mixed up in anything like this. But it's nice ta meet an American up here. I guess I done right in tellin' ya what I did . . ."

"You did," said Mannon.

"Well," said MacEldowney, "glad ta meet ya." They shook hands and the man took his bottle back to the bar, paid for his drinks and, with a vague wave of his hand, wandered out of the bar. Mannon sat back in his chair. If Chai didn't show up in five minutes he would go down to the temple himself.

He was just considering whether or not to leave when Chai

appeared in the doorway. Mannon could tell from his face that he hadn't been successful. Chai admitted his failure to locate any signs of a meeting. Then Mannon told him about the conversation with MacEldowney and about the Cambodian temple.

"I go now," said Chai.

"Okay. And I'm going with you."

"But sah, that is no good. Better you stay here. Or maybe better you go to fair."

"Where is the fair?"

The Sergeant pointed.

"All right," said Mannon. "It's on the way to the temple. I'll wait for you there. Damn it, I wish we'd brought some ammo for that pistol!"

"That is all right, sah. I take pistol anyhow."

"Okay. I'll be waiting at the fair. You come back when you're finished, or if you find you can't do it alone and need some help."

They walked down the main street until they came to the little country carnival site, where Mannon turned off.

He stepped inside the enclosure and strolled around, like a ferung tourist, he told himself. The exhibits were scanty but very popular. He watched some jugglers perform on a high wooden platform. In one tent he studied a display of canvas paintings in lurid reds and purples purporting to show the terrors of Buddhist hell. Sinners were surrounded by flames and crouched in fear as devils danced around them. Their sins were being expiated in various ways. Thieves had both hands thrust into flaming fires by the devils. A glutton was being forced to eat his own entrails. Gossips' tongues, stretched out of their mouths, were being pinched by devils with red-hot tongs. Men and women who had sinned through sex were surrounded by devils searing their private parts with hot irons.

Ducking out of the horrendous display, Mannon passed several booths selling gramophone records. Many of the songs

were Thai or Chinese but a large proportion were American hillbilly numbers. He could hear the loudspeaker blaring forth with "You Can't Break My Heart, It's Been Broken Before . . ."

Finally he came upon a small wooden ring inside which were five children's cars in bright, battered colours. The vehicles had no mechanism for propulsion but the five passengers steered them around and around, pushing them about with their feet on the ground while they laughed and shouted, almost hysterical with delight. A ring of youngsters at the edge of the enclosure jumped up and down, shouting with joy. Mannon felt a stab, almost physical, of compassion at the sight. On impulse he walked over to the old Thai who ran the concession and asked him how much each ride cost. The man pointed to a sign which read "10 setangs." Mannon found fifty ticals in his pocket and gave them to the old man who smiled and grasped his hand. Then Mannon took a pencil and wrote across the sign "500 Free Rides" and walked away as a group gathered around the old Thai who was explaining that rides were free from then on.

Looking at his watch, Mannon realised that Sergeant Chai had been gone for over an hour and a half. Impatient at the delay and concerned about what might be happening, he left the fair grounds and started walking down the road. Soon the lighted stores were behind him and he was passing Thai houses, most of them dark and silent in the moonlight. An occasional pye dog slunk out of sight at his approach. He estimated that the temple was about four hundred yards beyond the fair ground and again he regretted that he did not have at least one clip of ammunition with him.

As he approached a clump of tamarind trees behind which he assumed he would find the deserted building, he heard the sound of muffled voices and the tramp of feet. Here and there was the glimmer of a flashlight. He quickened his steps. Something was going on and he was sure it involved Sergeant Chai.

Through the trees he saw a square tower of crumbling stone, each side of which consisted of a huge face of Buddha, the inscrutable smile visible in the moonlight. The temple itself was in ruins and in the darkness around it he could glimpse the disorderly movement of many people, hear guttural calls and the sound of running feet. They were searching for someone and he realised it must be Chai. The only thing he could think of to help the Sergeant at the moment was to divert their attention.

Moving from the road towards the temple and simulating drunkenness, he yelled out, "What th' hell's going on!"

The sound of running ceased, followed by complete silence. He heard soft footfalls and realised that he was being surrounded. Suddenly he was blinded by the direct beam of a flashlight. Someone was standing in front of him, speaking Thai.

"Where's th' goddamned fair!" he shouted, slurring his words and weaving back and forth, hoping that someone in the group understood English. The light did not leave his face and there was a whispered consultation in the darkness.

"Fair! Wanna go to th' goddamn fair!" he shouted again. He felt the circle close in. Another muttered exchange of Thai and a swarthy face was thrust close to his. "What you want here!" demanded an imperious voice.

He was so relieved he almost forgot his role. "Wanna go to th' fair!" he cried out.

"Fair is in town. Why you come here?"

"Lookin' for th' fair. That's why the hell I come out here!"

"You drunk!" said the voice, finally, heavy with disgust.

"O.K. so I'm drunk. Mekong!" and he slapped his pockets as though looking for a bottle. "Where's my Mekong?"

Again he heard muttered imprecations. Evidently they were impatient of the drunken foreigner, and he realised that the novelty would wear off in a few moments. Before they could make up their minds what to do next he started lurching towards the temple. "Let's go th' fair . . ." He was stopped by a

wall of dark figures. Several pairs of arms reached out and savagely spun him around.

But that one step had been enough. High up on the tower, flattened against one of the faces of Buddha, he had glimpsed the outline of a figure. He was sure it was Chai.

Mannon stood, weaving back and forth. A dead foreigner might serve their purpose as well as a dead Thai . . . and he realised that someone in the crowd would have to make a decision in a matter of seconds.

Then the English-speaking Thai was beside him again, his hand holding Mannon's elbow. "Better you go fair," he said. "That way!" and the man shoved him towards the road.

"Come on . . . be my guest . . . my friend!" Mannon attempted to put his arm around the shoulder of the man but the latter angrily shrugged him off.

"You come quick. Now!" he replied.

Mannon, however, remained in place, looking around him, trying to estimate the number of men. It was impossible in the darkness, he concluded. There might be twenty-five or a hundred and twenty-five.

"How about it?" he repeated. "You guys come on . . . be my guests . . ."

Again he could hear an ominous mutter and then someone shouted from the rear. He could not understand the words but the impatient tone was unmistakable. He knew he would have to move out. Not daring to glance towards the tower again he began to sing . . . "Oh You Can't Break My Heart . . ." and the thought occurred to him that if they searched him, his identification would reveal he was from MAAG and they would find the pistol tucked in his belt, either of which would be sufficient to finish him off.

At that moment his arm was seized in a numbing grip and he found himself being propelled towards the road. Reaching the pavement, the Thai gave him a shove towards the town. In doing so his captor brushed against him and then stopped short as he felt the pistol under the jacket. He spun Mannon

around but the Major, using the edge of his hand, struck a smashing blow at the man's throat. The man toppled to the ground. Assuring himself the man was unconscious, Mannon dragged the inert form into the nearby bushes. Running his hands over the prostrate form, he drew from the Thai's belt what felt like a bamboo tube. Examining it he found it contained a long, thin knife whose polished steel blade glittered in the moonlight. Mannon whistled softly at the close call and then, still crouching in the bushes, considered what he must do next. It was time, he decided, to abandon all pretence, get to the police and have them find Sergeant Chai.

He rose to his feet. A rustling in the bushes a few yards down the road caught his attention. Jerking the pistol from his belt and seizing the barrel, he prepared to use it as a weapon. Then a figure emerged from the bushes and gasped, "Major . . ." It was Chai.

"Major . . ." said Chai when Mannon caught up with the panting figure. "I hear you . . . in the woods . . . I . . ."

"Don't talk now. Save your breath! Let's get the hell away from here," said Mannon and together they started running down the road.

They came within sight of the fair ground, and, seeing no one behind them, they slowed down.

"Was that you up on the tower?" asked Mannon, between gasps.

Chai nodded. "I climb up temple wall. Pretty soon . . . they see me . . ."

"Did you hear anything?"

"Yes. I hear. Same man as yesterday," said the Sergeant. "He say in one week . . . Free Thais take over town. Then maybe three weeks . . . on night of full moon . . . soldiers come across Mekong River . . ."

"The next full moon?"

"Yes, sah. Maybe three weeks."

Mannon put his arm around Chai's shoulder. "Chai, you're a good man. But Jesus, we've got to get away from here!"

"Maybe they look for me in temple."

"They probably know by now that you got away. And when they find the guy in the bushes, they'll know for sure . . . I think we'd better get to the police right away . . ."

"No, sah," said Chai. "Maybe police are no good. Better stay away. We go back to Chiang Mai."

Close to the fair they saw a bus ready to leave for Mong San. It was crowded with dishevelled, laughing Thais, most of them the worse for Mekong. On impulse, they scrambled aboard and wedged themselves in the middle of the swaying humanity for the next three quarters of an hour. At Mong San they found their way back to the air strip. Their packs were still under the big tree and they curled up for a few hours of fitful sleep before the morning light awakened them.

40

The next morning, Mannon and the Sergeant caught a ride to Chiang Mai on an old, battered truck loaded with empty Coke bottles. After letting Chai off near the rendezvous point with instructions to contact the guerrilla-training group, Mannon went on to Chiang Mai alone.

At the Chiang Mai MAAG he found that because the new radio operator had not arrived from Bangkok, the radio station was inoperative and the team chief suggested that Mannon relay his information through Lampang by telephone.

After considering the best means of getting the message through the public phone system, Mannon decided to use the code he and Sergeant Kelly had played around with before the arrival of Colonel Childs. During lunch, he reconstructed from memory the basic code. His biggest problem was to choose the sentence which served as a key. Remembering that he had seen the Sergeant reading the Rubaiyat and, since it was one of the few poems he knew himself, he chose the first line and proceeded to encode his information.

He spent almost an hour trying to get a phone patch through to Lampang and finally was rewarded by hearing the faint voice of the Sergeant at the other end, who advised him that Colonel Childs was out on an inspection tour of the post with some visiting Thai brass.

Mannon explained that he had a message for Colonel Childs to forward to Bangkok. "Listen, Sergeant," he shouted, "do you remember the code we used to fool around with?"

"The code? The Venturi? Yes, I do."

"Could you handle a message in it?"

"Wait a minute . . . I think there are still a couple of forms around. Go ahead. I'll work it out."

"Here goes." Mannon read off the message. After Kelly had reread it, he shouted, "Okay. Now listen. This message is real. It is not a practice one. Tell Childs it must be sent on to Bangkok immediately. Understand?"

"Yes, sir. Message is real. Not practice. It goes to Bangkok."

"Now for the key. Do you remember Omar?"

"Omar?"

"Yes. Your old friend . . . the guy who understood 'Mai Ben Rai' so well . . ."

"Oh, yes! Yes, I remember!"

"See if you can remember the first thing he said . . . the first line he spoke."

"Get it!"

"Okay. Fine. I'll be back day after tomorrow."

"You're scheduled to jump here at 0800 hours."

"Tell Childs I'll give him the details on this message when I get back."

"Okay, Major. Goodbye. And good luck!"

That night, somewhere in North Thailand, a message was received which had been recorded by one of the local telephone operators. She had found that she could earn an occasional 100-tical note by copying down certain telephone calls. This report read: "Major Ma-nong of MAAG called a

Sergeant Kelly at MAAG Lampang. Sent message. (A scrambled version of Mannon's coded message followed.) Major said Sergeant should try to remember somebody named 'Oh-mah.' "

The message was filed away as being incapable of translation or decoding without a copy of the MAAG code. However, the name of 'Oh-mah' was duly recorded on the Order of Battle chart of MAAG personnel in Thailand.

In Lampang, Sergeant Kelly hung up the phone, went to his room and rummaged around until he found one of the code sheets that he and the Major had used. Back at his desk he was just starting to consult the Rubaiyat when Colonel Childs returned.

"Sir," said the Sergeant, "Major Mannon just called from Chiang Mai. He sent a message which he said was important. He said it was real and not part of the problem and it should be forwarded to Bangkok right away."

"Message for Bangkok? From Mannon? Where is it?"

"It was sent in code, sir."

"Code! For Christ's sake! What the hell is he doing in Chiang Mai anyway? He's supposed to be up in the jungle on a tactical training problem, not practising code!"

"Sir, he said it wasn't practice. It was real . . ."

"Go ahead and decode it then."

"I was just getting ready. The reference is the Rubaiyat. The first line."

Colonel Childs paused in the doorway of his office. "The first line . . . of course! 'Wake for the Sun who startled into flight, the Stars before him in the field of night . . .' Something like that. Probably realised I'd know it right off. Try it out, Sergeant, after you check the exact wording."

In about twenty minutes the Sergeant appeared in the doorway.

"Here it is," he said, proudly, and laid the message on the desk. Childs read :

LAST NIGHT IN MONG RAI OVERHEARD PRIDI MAN FROM CHINA SAY SUBVERSIVES WILL GRAB MONG SAN AND MONG RAI IN ONE WEEK. FREE THAIS WILL CROSS MEKONG RIVER 29 JUNE AT THESE TWO POINTS IN FORCE. BELIEVE THIS IS GENUINE. DETAILS ON MY RETURN.

Childs put down the message. "Thank you, Sergeant," he said perfunctorily. Kelly, after a moment of hesitation, left.

"Goddamn him," Childs fumed to himself. Mannon and his histrionics . . . just one day away from the post and already he's discovered an imminent invasion! Childs firmly resolved to having nothing whatever to do with this kind of foolishness. That, he thought bitterly, is what comes of allowing a hare-brained nut loose in Thailand. Probably heard it at some bar! Childs decided that Mannon would not be allowed to cavort around Thailand again.

On the way out to lunch, Kelly stopped at the door.

"Sir," he said, "the courier will be here from Bangkok in about two hours. I can take the message from Mannon down to the air strip . . ."

"Sergeant," said Childs, "from now on that message is my concern, and I will handle it personally. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir."

41

One of Cooper's jobs was to open all the General's correspondence with the exception of those envelopes which were obviously personal. The mail on this particular morning included a letter marked "Personal and Private." He placed it, unopened, on the General's desk.

Later Cooper found the General sitting with the open envelope before him and a Thermofax sheet in his hand. "I gather this letter came in the regular mail," he said.

"Yes, sir."

The General handed him the tissue sheet. It was a reproduction of a note from Air Marshal Wicharn thanking Colonel White for letting him know about the MAAG special grant and agreeing with him that the Air Force was entitled to at least a third of it. A few additional remarks indicated that Colonel White had evidently let it be known he would be available upon his retirement, for a position with the Thai Government. The Marshal's wording was clever enough to do no more than acknowledge this fact.

Cooper whistled softly.

"I can't imagine who sent this copy along to me or how he got hold of it," said the General, slowly, as he picked up the Thermofax again. "Of course, Wicharn might have sent it himself . . ."

"But wouldn't he just tell you, sir, instead of going round about?"

"Yes, I suppose he might," agreed the General. He looked at the postmark on the envelope. It had been mailed downtown at the main post office. "You haven't seen the original of this anywhere in the office, have you?" he asked.

"No, sir. I haven't."

"It could have been Thermofaxed by someone in this office . . . the Navy section has a machine . . ."

"In that case," said Cooper, "why go all the way downtown to mail it? Why not just put it on your desk?"

The General nodded.

"Do you want me to check around and see what I can find out?"

The General shook his head. "I don't want you to do that. It couldn't be managed quietly enough. Word would be sure to get around the headquarters. I'll talk to White. Will you send him in, please."

When Colonel White entered the General's office Cooper heard the General ask him to close the door.

"White," said the General slowly, "I want to ask you a

very important question and I want you to consider your answer carefully."

"Yes, sir," said White, uneasily. He was wondering which of the officers at the headquarters was involved. And in what.

"As far as you know, have the Thais received any information about the special grant?"

White suddenly found it difficult to breathe and his knees felt weak. He had no idea what the General might have heard. Surely Wicharn wasn't fool enough to talk. And that god-damned letter had been torn up and flushed down the latrine.

"Not to my knowledge, sir," said White.

The General looked at his ashen face for a moment and then reached into his drawer and handed over the sheet of tissue. White recognised it at once.

"This is evidently a copy of a letter sent to you by Marshal Wicharn. Before you say anything more, I feel I should warn you that whatever you say may be used against you later on, Colonel."

White's mind was dazed. Surely Wicharn hadn't double-crossed him. On the other hand, he remembered how the Thais had handled the previous MAAG commander, Colonel Carpenter. A gust of fury swept over him at the perfidity of the Thais . . . and his first reaction was to deny the whole thing. But he had no idea what else the General might know.

"Yes, sir," he said, finally, in a low voice.

. "It confirms a conversation you evidently had with Wicharn, a conversation in which you told him of the existence of the grant. You also told him the amount. And it would appear that you made a recommendation as to how much of it the Air Force should receive!"

The Colonel did not trust himself to speak. He nodded, shaken with anger at the thought that probably the wily Air Marshal was using him to further some devious plan of his own.

"This letter," continued the General in an even, implacable voice, "indicates that you have violated my instructions. You do remember my instructions, don't you?"

"That's right, General," he said and then, with an intensity born of his anger, he broke forth. "Marshal Wicharn does know about the grant. I didn't tell him anything he couldn't have known already. There were plenty of opportunities for leaks. There's the Embassy staff and there is . . ." he caught himself as he started to say "this staff." "There are . . . others," he finished, lamely.

"What others? Who?"

There was a pause and then the General continued, "Are you insinuating that someone else told him?"

Colonel White could hardly keep his thoughts straight. He realised that his entire career hung in the balance and he cursed that Sunday morning brunch with the Marshal. "No," he said, finally. "I told him. But believe me, General, it was in my judgment the best thing to do considering the entire picture. I maintain that . . ."

The General interrupted. "You are telling me that . . ." he glanced at the date of the note, ". . . a few days after my warning that this information was top secret, you deliberately violated instructions. Is that correct?"

The Colonel took a deep breath. "Yes, sir."

"I would like to know why."

The Colonel swallowed. "Sir, I considered that it was not possible to keep such a secret in Bangkok. And I thought it would be permissible to discuss with one of the chiefs of the Thai Services . . . something that probably was common knowledge."

"What the hell are you talking about, White? You just told me it was you who gave him the information."

"General Mason," and White assumed an attitude of hurt pride, "as your Executive I felt I was entitled to a certain leeway in handling MAAG affairs in a way I thought was for the best interests of . . ."

"I asked you a question, Colonel White. I'll reword it. Were you or were you not the first man to tell Wicharn about the grant?"

The Colonel finally found his voice. "Yes, sir. I was." And then he added, weakly, "I assumed it was common knowledge." His voice was flat with despair.

"Sir," he added, "may I say something to explain?"

"By all means."

"I've been in this MAAG for several years now and I know the Thais pretty well. A grant of this kind, given to one Service, is bound to cause repercussions throughout the other Services. I've tried to protect you from a dangerous political situation which you seem to ignore entirely. For some time there has been a coup in the offing. It almost happened the night you went to Government House the first time. And this grant is just the thing to bring it about, if you persist in giving it all to the Army."

"Then why the hell tell the Air Force Chief about it? What does that solve? Why should you be so interested in whether he gets a share or not? What you're saying is that you know better than the Ambassador or me how this thing should be handled!"

The Colonel took a deep breath. "In this case, yes."

"White," said the General, barely controlling his rising anger, "we have an Embassy here who knows a hell of a lot more about these things than we do. Our job is to give the Thais military advice. We do not meddle in anything else. State has a delicate job and I will not have it jeopardised—which it has been—by you, getting mixed up in matters clearly outside your responsibility and which are none of your business!"

"And," continued the General, "I'm not as ignorant as you seem to think. We discovered a week ago that someone had violated security. Both the Ambassador and I have been trying to find out who was responsible. Since it turns out to be you, I have no alternative but to relieve you of your assignment as of now. I will request higher headquarters to appoint an investigating board to handle this affair."

"Yes, sir."

"Do you have any leave accumulated? It might be less embarrassing to everyone if you left the headquarters—of course under no circumstances can you leave Thailand."

"Yes, sir."

"All right. The board will be appointed as quickly as possible. For the present, this will remain a matter between the two of us, as far as MAAG is concerned. Your duties will be taken over by Colonel Allard, the G-1. Brief him some time this afternoon. Do you have anything else you want to say?"

"No, sir."

"Send Colonel Allard in to see me when you leave."

42

On the morning that Mannon was due to return to Lampang, Colonel Childs sat down to breakfast, thinking how quietly and smoothly his affairs had run for the past week. He had enjoyed Lampang for the first time since his arrival. He glanced at his watch. Mannon was due back at eight o'clock and the party would jump on the drop zone. More theatricals! He would have to go out with Colonel Thom, he supposed, and take part in the circus that the Major seemed to drag around with him wherever he went.

He had just poured out his coffee when he heard the drone of planes in the morning stillness. He got up and looked out of the window. Over the drop zone, in the dance, he could see two C-47s at about a thousand feet, in jump formation. To his surprise the air suddenly blossomed with parachutes. He checked his watch. They were a half-hour early. Oh, well, that would save a trip to the DZ.

He was buttering a piece of toast when a Thai soldier ran up the steps and burst into the room without knocking.

"Please, sah, you come right away to headquarters! Something wrong with plane! Major Mannon! Parachute not open!"

Childs jumped up, a cold chill running down his spine. "What do you mean?" he shouted. "I watched them jump. I didn't see any streamers . . ."

"You come quick!" said the Thai. His urgency forced Childs into action.

"Look," said the soldier as they reached the veranda of the headquarters building. One of the planes was making a turn directly overhead. A tiny black speck dangled behind the tail.

Childs ran into the office to find disorder everywhere. Soldiers were hurrying back and forth, all of them talking at once. Colonel Thom's interpreter came out of the office. "Colonel want to know what is wrong. Why Major Mannon hanging outside plane?"

"Jesus Christ! I just got here! Tell Thom I don't know, but I'll find out. Where's Sergeant Kelly?" A Thai soldier pointed to the radio room. "He talking to plane."

Childs quickly walked into the room. Kelly was at the set, earphones on his head.

"What's going on, Sergeant?" Childs asked.

The Sergeant jumped up and pulled off the earphones. "Major Mannon was the last man in the stick. Somehow he got hung up on the tail. I'm trying to talk to the jumpmaster to tell him to cut the Major loose!"

Childs, at a loss about what to do, nevertheless resented Sergeant Kelly's taking over. "Well, I'm here now," he said. "Let me talk to the jumpmaster."

In a moment the Sergeant handed the Colonel the microphone and switched on the speaker. "It's Lieutenant Janok," he said. "He's on now."

"This is Colonel Childs," he shouted into the mike. "Is this Lieutenant Janok?"

There was a roaring sound over the speaker. Childs was looking at the Sergeant with annoyance when a faint voice came through the static. "This is Lieutenant Janok. Major Mannon jump out. But chute not open. Static line still attached. What shall I do?"

Colonel Thom appeared among the crowd in the doorway. Childs was utterly at a loss. He picked up the mike. "Can you pull him in?" he asked.

Over the static came Lieutenant Janok's voice. "We try. Only three men in plane. Very difficult."

The Sergeant spoke up. "If he's not tangled, they better cut him loose, sir."

Childs nodded. If Mannon were cut loose, he could use his reserve chute. But if he had fainted or the reserve tangled, he would be killed.

"Wait a minute," he shouted over the mike. "Lieutenant. Get everybody in the plane and try to pull him in once more."

"Okay . . . okay" came faintly over the speaker. A Thai soldier appeared in the radio room with several pairs of field glasses. Colonel Thom took a pair, Childs and the Sergeant each grabbed a pair. They hurried out on the porch. The plane banked again, and they could see the dangling figure. It seemed closer to the door.

"Oh God," prayed Childs. "Let him be pulled in. Why does this have to happen to me!"

"I think they've got him!" shouted the Sergeant, his glasses up to his eyes, but the plane moved out of view. They walked back to the radio room. "Ask them what's going on," said Childs, almost fearfully, as the Sergeant picked up the mike. Lieutenant Janok's voice came over the speaker again. "Sorry. Colonel Childs. We get him to door. I touch his hand. Cannot pull inside. Wind too strong."

Colonel Childs stood hating the Thais as he had never hated anyone before; hating them for their slight bodies, their weak arms, their futile attempts to be helpful. And because of them he was standing here faced with an impossible situation.

"They'd better cut him loose," said the Sergeant again. "Then he can pull his reserve."

Childs hated Kelly too for his suggestion. After all, the Sergeant had no responsibility. It was his. He had a vision of

the tiny black figure plummeting to earth. There would be an investigation, inquest, explanations, sworn statements, and maybe a court-martial. Goddamn the Army and everything it stood for, he thought. He wanted to be home again, at the breakfast table with Mother Childs instead of being in the middle of this barbaric country.

He saw the faces in a circle around him. Colonel Thom was staring at him sternly. Remote and safe, thought Childs, because Mannon is an American. And no matter what happened, he, Guy Childs II, would have to stand the lug.

"We'd better do something pretty quick," said Kelly.

The radio crackled again and the voice of Janok, this time with a note of terror in it, came over the air. "What shall I do? Do you hear me, Colonel Childs?"

For a moment the latter had an impulse to smash the radio and run away from the whole mess. "Yes, I hear you" was all he could say.

"Cut him loose, goddamn it!" yelled the Sergeant suddenly.

That did it. Childs' mouth contracted and he grabbed the mike. "Try to haul him in once more," he shouted. "Do you hear me? Pull him in!"

And the faint "Yes, sir" came back. Childs laid down the microphone. If I ever get out of this, he thought, I'll go back to Bangkok. I'll be the best goddamned AG in the entire Army. I'll read every paper and write every report . . .

Again the crackling was broken by the voice of Janok. "Cannot pull him, sir. Men too tired. What'll I do now?"

Childs picked up the mike without knowing what he was about to say. He spoke into the metal and plastic device and his voice was tired. "Janok, is he conscious? Can you tell if he is . . . alive?"

"Sir," came back a faint voice, "I cannot tell."

Childs heard the voice of Sergeant Kelly behind him, talking to Colonel Thom . . . "Of course . . . if the plane landed, we could foam the runway . . ." He held the mike to his lips again. "Land the plane. Tell the pilot to bring it in."

"With Major outside?" came back immediately over the speaker.

"Yes," said Childs, with relief. "Tell the pilot to come in slowly. Wait for our signal before landing." He laid down the mike and turned to Kelly. "Is there any foam for the runway?"

The Sergeant was already in the doorway. "We've got some old stuff. I'll have them get it out right away."

Colonel Thom stepped up, an enquiring look on his face.

"Explain to him," said Childs to the interpreter, "that we'll foam the runway first. They use the stuff on runways when something goes wrong with a plane. It prevents fires and makes a smooth landing . . ."

Colonel Thom nodded his head and said something to the interpreter. "Colonel Thom say he already call doctor from mission house."

Childs had forgotten about a doctor.

"Colonel Thom say now he go to airfield," continued the interpreter. "He say you want ride with him."

Childs nodded.

Out on the runway Sergeant Kelly supervised the spreading of the foam. When it was spread the pilot was given orders to land.

The plane approached the field in a slow curve, the dangling figure still at the end of the static line. Tension mounted among the spectators, all of them paratroopers themselves, watching the plane settle slowly towards the ground. Lower and lower it sank, then the wheels touched the runway and the craft was engulfed in whirling foam as the pilot reversed the props. In a slow, twisting movement, the plane came to a standstill at right angles to the runway.

The observers started towards the plane at a dead run as several figures leaped out of the open cargo door on to the runway. Childs neared the body, lying in grey-white foam, limp and motionless. There was no blood, just the awful stillness. When the body was turned over, Childs saw the face, mottled

and dark with the tongue protruding. There was no doubt: Major Mannon was dead.

The mission doctor made his way through the crowd of troopers and knelt down by the body. After a few moments he straightened up. "The man is dead. Evidently of strangulation."

"Strangulation?" asked Childs. The Thai interpreter was quickly translating the doctor's words for Colonel Thom.

"I don't know much about parachuting," said the doctor, a middle-aged, tired-looking man with glasses, "but the men here say he was hanging in the air for quite a while. The wind . . . 'blast' I guess you call it . . . from the propellers cut off his breathing. Probably he could have stood it for a few minutes, but eventually it was fatal."

"You mean he was dead up in the air? Before the landing?"

"I can't say how long ago he died . . . but it wouldn't take long up there."

Lieutenant Janok stepped forward. "We try to pull him in," he said. "He try say something . . ."

"He was telling you to cut him loose!" exclaimed the Sergeant. There was a pause, and the Thais glanced at each other.

"Of course an investigation will have to be made . . .," said Childs.

"Hell, Colonel," said Sergeant Kelly, "we're investigating right now. Let's see what happened!"

He knelt down and turned the body over. The static line was still attached to the chute and the back-pack cover was intact. The Sergeant fingered the lacing and looked at Childs who had knelt down beside him. It wasn't nylon cord but some dark, heavy substance. "The chute didn't open," said Kelly, "because the lacing didn't snap out. And look at that break-cord. That's made of the same stuff."

"What the hell do you suppose it is?" asked the Colonel.

"It looks like rawhide to me," said Kelly.

Carefully the Sergeant, with the aid of several Thais,

detached the harness from the body of Major Mannon. Dazed and motionless, Childs stared. He remembered vaguely a discussion about break-cord and nylon lacing. Something about Sergeant Bayat's forgetting to order it and Mannon's remark that they would have to manage somehow.

Colonel Thom's interpreter stepped up beside Childs. "Sir, Colonel want to know what was wrong."

"Tell him," said Childs, seeing the impassive face of the Commander, "the accident involves the break-cord. It will have to be checked into." The interpreter again spoke. "Colonel want to know, sir, if it was failure of equipment. He say very strange because the other man okay. Only Major Mannon."

Childs swallowed. Here they go, he thought. All ready to put the blame on us for sending faulty equipment. Suddenly he knew, with terrible finality, that somehow it was all going to turn out to be his own fault. Rawhide! In parachutes! He could see the report now, on its way to Washington. "Tell the Colonel," he said, "that we will investigate. I simply don't know right now."

There was one more question. "Colonel wish to stop all parachute jumping until you find out."

"Of course. Have him issue the order." He had forgotten about that for the moment.

Arrangements were made with the doctor to have the body transported to the local mission hospital until instructions came from Bangkok.

Back in his office, Childs sat down. His mind was beginning to function. Notification to Bangkok was the first requirement. He instructed the Sergeant to put through a call for Colonel Hawley. He would pass on details; AG would make out the forms and notify the next of kin. Then there was the investigation of the accident. He called Kelly back into the office. "About this lacing and break-cord," said Childs. "I'd like to find out the circumstances and why the proper lacing and break-cord wasn't used on the Major's chute."

"Yes, sir, I'll get the records right away," said the Sergeant. His near-hysteria at the air strip had disappeared and Kelly was once more the stolid, military man.

He returned with a sheaf of papers. Childs discovered the last order for break-cord was dated two months previously. The stock record card showed that at that time there was enough on hand for about a hundred jumps. Since then the school had made sixty jumps, plus ten demonstration jumps and the guerrilla problem.

"Is this the whole file?" he asked.

Kelly nodded his head.

"Where's last month's requisition for break-cord and lacing?"

"There is none."

"Why not?"

"Evidently Sergeant Bayat didn't bother to put in an order."

"I don't understand . . . Did you know about this?"

"Sir, both the Major and I were told that supply was not our concern and that you would personally supervise all requisitions."

Childs winced. So it was Bayat. That Thai son of a bitch! Trading on his friendship! He looked up. "Please send Sergeant Bayat to me."

"Sergeant Bayat is in Bangkok, sir. I believe you requested that he be given a three-day pass."

Childs felt numb. "Keep working on the Bangkok call."

"Yes, sir," and the Sergeant left.

When Colonel Hawley was finally contacted, Childs told him what had happened.

"Any idea why the chute didn't open, Childs?"

"Not exactly, sir. Something to do with break-cord and back-pack lacing."

"Collect every chute used on the jump," said Hawley, "and start in right away on the investigation. I'll send up a disinterested party to give you a hand. Mannon dead! I can

hardly believe that it's possible ! Have you stopped all jumping until it's been determined what happened?"

"Yes, sir. My first order."

They discussed the accident some more and Hawley said, "I'll send up Major Lowell tomorrow. Plus a man to investigate this thing."

"What's Major Lowell coming up for?"

"Oh, I guess you haven't heard, Childs. You're being reassigned."

"Reassigned?"

"Yes. G-1 is taking over the Chief of Staff's job and you'll fill in as G-1."

Childs could hardly believe his ears. "Me? As G-1? Have you any idea for how long?"

"I don't know. Frankly, I think it will probably be for good, if things work out the way they've been going. Be sure to brief Lowell completely. Better make it two days, then report in here. This Mannon thing is a terrible shock. I think I'll be up myself in a day or two. Keep in touch with me on your findings."

"Yes, sir."

Childs sat back in his chair. It had been the most incredible day he had ever put in. The vision of Bangkok floated before him. As the G-1. With his own car. And a little apartment. And the Chez Eve for lunch.

He lit a cigarette. If only he could get Mannon's face out of his mind . . .

43

The news of Mannon's death created consternation in MAAG headquarters, and the circumstances were unique enough to start rumours beyond the confines of MAAG. Cooper and Prasert discussed it in Tongchai's room.

"But Jimmy, how could it happen?" asked Prasert.

"We don't know," said Cooper. "The whole thing is odd.

All we've heard is that the chute didn't open. That just isn't possible. I can understand Mannon getting hung up on the tail of a plane, maybe, but not dangling at the end of the static line."

"Did Colonel Childs have anything to do with it?"

"Childs? He wasn't even in the plane. He was on the ground and gave the order for the plane to land."

"With the Major still outside?"

"Yes."

"Couldn't they cut him loose or something like that?"

"Nobody can figure out why they didn't! But we don't know all the circumstances."

"Colonel Childs didn't like him . . ."

"What do you mean?"

"Well," said Prasert, "could it be that the Colonel did something?"

"Oh, come on, Prasert. You're not saying that Childs deliberately caused the death of Mannon?"

"Not deliberately. Sometimes these things happen . . . how do you say it . . . subconscious."

"You're wrong, believe me!"

Prasert shrugged and sipped his drink.

"Remember the last time he was here . . . and he went with us to the Hoi Chien Lau?" asked Cooper, nostalgically.

"And the gunpowder he brought along . . ."

"And how the Tigress flipped . . ."

Tongchai broke in, "He was the man we met at Dick's place?"

"That's right. It was his promotion dinner."

"He was a good man," she said, "maybe too good . . ."

"How do you mean, 'too good'?" asked Cooper.

She was looking at Prasert and Cooper sensed that some oriental subtlety was involved. He sipped his drink and did not press the question.

"Have they told his father and mother yet?" asked Prasert.

Cooper set down his glass. "The G-1 said he has no kin except an aunt or something in Ohio . . ."

After a moment or two, Cooper continued. "It's funny but now that I think of it, nobody really knew Frank at all. I considered him my friend but I didn't know him either. There was always something . . . remote . . . about him. He lived in a world of his own. He wasn't like anybody else I've ever known. I can't imagine him as dead."

"He isn't, Jimmy," said Prasert. "You are not a Buddhist so you cannot understand that no man dies. He lives . . . over and over . . ."

Tongchai, sitting on the divan beside Cooper, stirred a little. "The Major must have lived many wonderful lives before this one," she said, "and his next one will be even better."

Cooper, studying the faces the two Tais, realised that they believed their philosophy and he perceived how it could make death something very different from the kind of death he had encountered in a white clapboard church in New England.

He sat back on the divan with Tongchai. He was too much the Irishman not to feel a sharp sense of loss and loneliness thinking about Mannon. In the calm faces of the two Thais, however, he realised that he saw another manifestation of Mai Ben Rai . . . not laziness or unconcern, but the acceptance of the fact that all things are transitory. The Siamese, he realised, built no barriers against time and change but, rather, accepted the fact that the tides of life and birth and death would rise and fall, heedless of the human feelings involved.

Prasert stood up to leave. "We shall miss Major Mannon very much. He was a most unusual man."

Cooper nodded. Then he looked at Prasert. "How are the application papers coming along in the Ministry? Any news yet?"

Prasert shook his head. "No news has come down yet. But sometimes these things take a long time. Maybe a month."

After he had left, Cooper and Tongchai remained on the divan. Tongchai did not speak, but nestled closer, as though offering the warmth of her body as a reminder, in the face of his loss, that life went on.

It was four o'clock in the morning when Private Mann, the Charge of Quarters at MAAG headquarters in Bangkok, was awakened by the sharp buzzing of the switchboard. He muttered a sleepy, obscene protest and, jumping out of bed, his bare feet slipping on the polished floor, walked over to the board, pausing to flick on the lights. He was slow at handling calls and after several false tries managed to plug in the proper jacks. The excited voice of Major Hood came through from the MAAG office in Chiang Mai.

After the first few words, Private Mann grabbed a pencil and started to write.

The telephone line kept fading out and he had to ask for so many repeats that the Major lost his temper and yelled at him to get the hell on the ball. It took a long time to get all the information down on the message pad. It was a hair-raising report.

A few hours before, guerrilla forces of unknown strength had surprised Mong San and Mong Rai. The Thai infantry company at Mong San had been cut off entirely; the mortar battery at Mong Rai had reported it was surrounded by an unknown number of attackers who were using hand grenades and machine pistols.

Garbled word about suspicious activities had come from two other towns along the border. So far, no identification of the guerrillas had been made. Major Hood did not know how much of the Thai communications system was still working. The Thai Army headquarters at Chiang Mai had sent out observers to try and determine just what was happening, and the MAAG installation there would try to keep in contact with Bangkok. Advise General Mason at once.

Private Mann did nothing until he had put on his pants, shoes and shirt. He could think better, somehow, in uniform.

Then he consulted the Duties of the CQ handbook and found that in cases of emergency he was to call the chief of staff first. After frantic flipping of switches he got an outside line and in a few moments the sleepy voice of Colonel Allard was on the line. When Mann had finished conveying the message, the Colonel sounded wide awake. The CQ was ordered to telephone General Mason and Colonel Hawley immediately. Allard himself would be at the headquarters within a half-hour.

Colonel Hawley was actually the first officer to arrive. He studied Mann's messy transcript and, after copying down the important items, went upstairs to his office. Colonel Allard and the General met in front of the building. "General," said Allard as they hurried up the steps, "this situation may be embarrassing for you as I've only been on the job a week and I've still got to get my feet on the ground. I'll do my best. Would you rather call Colonel White in to handle things for a while?"

The General frowned. "No," he said, "you'll do all right."

They read the message and went upstairs to Hawley's office. Within minutes, Hawley flashed the switchboard again, asking the CQ to try and contact the MAAG office at Chiang Mai. Meanwhile, in Hawley's office the three officers were tracing the events of the night on a large-scale map. The General marked tentative locations in grease pencil.

"Maybe I'd better start calling in my people," said Hawley.

"No," said the General, glancing at his watch. "It's after five now. Let's wait until they get here at the regular time. I don't want to get everybody stirred up until we know more. When does the radio net open up?"

"Eight-thirty," said Allard.

"It might be pretty serious," said the General. "How about setting up a war room when your people get in, Hawley? Use my conference room."

The first faint streaks of day were beginning to light the sky when the General walked along the upper veranda to his office.

Birds were stirring in the trees and the air was heavy with the scent of night-blooming flowers. Of all times for this to happen, he reflected, it was just about the worst—his estrangement from the Prime Minister, White's removal, Mannon's strange death, Cooper's problems, and now an attack. He walked into his office and switched on the light.

He was studying a map of Thailand when Hawley came in. "General," he said, "I got in communication with Chiang Mai and I've obtained a few more details. The infantry company at Mong San, as far as anybody can tell, must have been a hotbed of rebel activity. The last report is that they've set up outposts all around the town and a roadblock on the Chiang Mai highway. Over at Mong Rai the situation isn't clear. As you know, there's an infantry company and a mortar battery there. The mortar battery has either been surrounded by rebels or they've gone over to them. The infantry company is trying to regain contact with them. Thai Army headquarters at Chiang Mai are also trying to find out what's going on."

"Any other towns involved?"

"A message from Xchiang, near the Cambodian border, says the mayor of the town has either been captured or killed."

During this exchange, the Operations Sergeant walked into the adjoining conference room with maps, acetate and grease pencils. He was a stocky veteran of Korea and went about his business with dispatch. The General reflected that it was comforting to see old hands at work.

"I've called one of my officers at home," said Hawley, "and told him to go directly downtown to Thai Army headquarters and find out the big picture on his way out here."

"Good," said the General, "I'll talk to G-2 when he gets in and have him get to work with the Thais too. We've got to determine whether this is an actual attack by outside forces or an internal uprising."

"Yes, sir. But if it is really an internal affair, the Thais may still try to brand them as outside forces. On the other hand, if

the attackers are from outside Thailand, they'll pose as Thais for the sake of world opinion."

The two men looked at each other without speaking for a moment.

"I'm wondering . . .," said the General. "Last week Mannon held that guerrilla problem up in that area . . . you'd think that if an uprising was cooking, there would have been some indication. Mannon might have picked up something. He was pretty sharp."

"Yes, sir. Now we'll never know."

After Hawley had gone, the General sat down to consider his own position. He decided that he would call the Prime Minister directly if he did not receive word from Government House by noon. It galled him to be in a position where he would have to call first, but he concluded that this was his duty.

He walked out on the veranda. MAAG personnel were beginning to arrive for the day's work. He noticed the alacrity with which they hastened up the front stairs. Evidently the Bangkok radio had already announced the activities up north and their servants had spread the word. He went over to Allard's desk. "Call all personnel together. I want to talk to them."

"Yes, sir."

At eight-thirty, when the entire headquarters personnel had assembled in the main office, the General went down. "I've called you in here," he began, "to discuss this situation. I assume all of you have heard various reports of the difficulties Thai units are having up north. Right now it involves only a few towns. It may turn out to be nothing at all. On the other hand, it may be the beginning of something much bigger. We don't know.

"I want to remind you that you are not to discuss the situation outside this headquarters. I know this will be hard, but I will not tolerate any gossip or conjectures coming from MAAG. I'm not, of course, referring to your exchanges with

the Thais on MAAG business; I'm talking about when you are at home with your families and Thai servants are around. If I hear that anybody has been doing loose talking, I will have no recourse but to 'seal in' this headquarters. I'm sure none of you want that. So don't talk! Colonel Allard will answer your specific questions."

In the Ambassador's office, later that morning, the Ambassador and the General went over the military situation in detail and Mason's information was added to that obtained by Murphy's attachés.

"Let's review the scene, Ed," said Murphy. "There's no doubt in my mind that this whole thing has been engineered by the Communists. There may be unrest here and there, but I am convinced that there is no widespread dissatisfaction, at least not enough to bring about a revolution. I'm not saying that Thailand is Shangri-La by a hell of a way, but the rice crop was sold this year and the per capita income—and this is from our figures, not theirs—has gone up. Not much, but it is up. Compared with their neighbours, these people are well off and they know it.

"The Free Thai organisation has been established in South China for almost ten years now. Evidently their tactics are to round up all the Thais they can find in Burma, Laos and China, indoctrinate them, and then slip them back across the border. Some of them are relatives of the northern Thais. Many of them left Thailand during the war when the Japs came in. Some are just plain troublemakers. But the point is that they all speak Thai and can pass as citizens.

"Thailand has always been free, so the only thing the Commies have to work against is the Bangkok government. They've got to make out that Bangkok is oppressing the people. You get even a few believers and you've got the beginning of a dandy little set-up."

General Mason stirred in his chair. "But the authorities down here must know about this . . ."

"They do, Ed. Especially the police. They've been throwing out infiltrators for years. But the border is vulnerable; the only boundary is the river. It can be crossed any dark night."

The Ambassador lit a cigarette. "Whether this episode last night fits in the Communist timetable or whether their campaign has been stepped up, I don't know. My personal opinion is that the timetable for invasion might have been pushed ahead because of two factors...improved Thai anti-Communist propaganda, and you. That joint manoeuvre with the Services actually co-operating must have convinced Pridi and his followers that the Thais mean business and are now working together. You may not realise it, Ed, but the impact of your suggestions is starting to be felt.

"So the Commies have started the ball rolling by grabbing Mong San and Mong Rai. And then there's that other town on the eastern border, Xchiang."

"But, sir," said the General, "we don't actually know who has Mong San and Mong Rai."

"True," replied the Ambassador, "but look at the situation at Mong Rai. It's the Thai infantry who are trying to get through to the mortar battery. They've been told to either rescue their comrades or destroy them if they are resisting.

"And at Xchiang the mayor was shot. Right now the reports say that infiltrators have the town in a grip of terror."

"To my mind," said the General, "the biggest question mark is reinforcements from across the border."

"The Thais here in Bangkok seem to agree with you, Ed," said the Ambassador. "At least, I'm told the Army is convinced this is a prelude to a big crossing. The wetbacks already up there will play around a while to make it look like an internal affair. Then they'll scream for the Free Thais across the border to come over and 'rescue' them."

The two men agreed that MAAG personnel would be instructed to take no part in actual military operations. But if they were attacked they would, of course, defend themselves.

"And now, sir," said the General, "I have one problem which concerns me personally."

"I think I know what it is," said the Ambassador. "The Prime Minister."

"Yes, sir."

"Has he talked to you today?"

"No, sir, he hasn't."

"What do you feel you should do?"

"I think it might be best for me to call him and ask if I can be of any help."

The Ambassador sat back. "Ed," he said, "I'd do the same thing."

Back at MAAG, the General placed a call for the Prime Minister. He was informed that the Prime Minister was tied up but that he would get in touch with the General as soon as the situation permitted. The General hung up the phone, trying to decide whether this was a brush-off or a legitimate answer.

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The activities in northern Thailand created immediate, world-wide interest and the Prime Minister promptly announced that all possible measures were being taken to clear up the situation. He revealed that a task force, including tanks and artillery, had been dispatched northwards from Army headquarters at Chiang Mai with the mission of liberating the infantry company at Mong San. The task-force orders instructed them, upon completion of this mission, to swing eastwards and join with the Thai infantry company at Mong Rai to either liberate or reduce the mortar battery being held by the Free Thai infiltrators.

General Kawee announced that the Army had dispatched another task force to Xchiang, in eastern Thailand, to restore order. The balance of the Thai armed forces had been alerted

for action and all leave cancelled. Kawee also stated that all efforts were being made to regain control without shooting loyal Thais, and local commanders had been given authority to negotiate wherever possible.

A few days later, Ambassador Murphy called General Mason, informed him of his intention to visit Chiang Mai and invited him and Cooper to go along.

The Embassy plane touched down at Chiang Mai airfield the following morning where it was met by MAAG and Thai Army representatives. In the Army headquarters at Chiang Mai, enclosed in barbed wire and heavily guarded, the Ambassador and his party met the local commander, General Wong, a stolid man who explained the details of the operation and pointed out that the movement of the task force had been slowed down by blown bridges and minefields. Under General Mason's questioning he also revealed that artillery and tanks were finding it difficult to move due to the poor condition of the roads, and the fact that many of the intact bridges were too light for such traffic and had collapsed.

The Ambassador's party inspected the prisoner cage. One of the prisoners was a Thai soldier from the Mong San infantry company. Nervous but smiling, he was obviously happy to be captured. His story was that on the night of the attack, the Mong San barracks had suddenly been surrounded by Free Thais who had evidently come into the area posing as locals going to the carnival. The commander and key personnel had been shot and the company, now commanded and staffed by the insurgents, had moved out to their present positions.

Several of the other prisoners were Free Thais. Here was no geniality or friendly camaraderie. Their eyes burning with hatred, they stood off by themselves, sullen and even a little proud, quite willing to be martyrs for a cause they had never surrendered and which they obviously were confident would be victorious in the end.

General Wong was preparing to visit the area of operations.

Ambassador Murphy asked if he, the General and Cooper might go along. Accordingly, they were furnished steel helmets, pistols and first-aid packs. Preceded by a jeep-mounted machine gun, the convoy took off. Cooper was surprised to see farmers and their wives and children going about their work in rice paddies with no apparent awareness of what was going on a few miles north of them. The farmers waved at the vehicles as they passed in the bright sunshine.

They dismounted at the task-force headquarters, located in a dense bamboo thicket. The local commander explained that a left-flank operation which jumped off early that morning had already bogged down. The woods had proved too dense for the tanks and the accompanying infantry had been ambushed. After sustained casualties, the attack had been stopped.

Moving forward on foot, the Ambassador and his party, with the aid of field glasses, observed the sporadic firing of the infantry and mortars.

Later that afternoon, the General and the Ambassador sat side by side in the plane, returning to Bangkok.

"I don't understand what's holding them back," said the General. "Apparently they pay no attention to the advisers. That's their privilege, of course, but I'm concerned about what might happen at the border while they're fooling around with tanks twenty miles behind."

"Remember, Ed, the Prime Minister wants them to go slow and to negotiate if they can."

"But they've got to make up their minds what they want to do. Negotiating seems to be messing up the whole thing. They should issue an ultimatum and, if it isn't complied with, move in."

"I agree with you, Ed, but the Prime Minister is in a tough spot right now."

"But what about those prisoners? If that's the kind of men who have taken over the units, then the units have to be wiped

out. If loyal Thais get hurt, that can't be helped. They've got to learn what it means to defy their own government. Then the Prime Minister can negotiate to his heart's content."

The Ambassador nodded.

"As it is," continued the General, "they're horsing around with a couple of roadblocks and giving the impression they're weak. I think I'll call the Prime Minister when I get back. This situation is begging for trouble. If word gets around that the Army can't take care of a small situation like this, what's to stop the whole country from exploding?"

"Ed," said the Ambassador, "I want to talk something over with you in my office when we get back."

They sat in silence for a while. The Ambassador turned to Cooper. "What do you think about all this?" he asked, pleasantly.

"Sir," said Cooper, "I've been thinking about the Xchiang affair. From what I read, these little villages have been electing their own mayors for hundreds of years. That sounds to me like the kind of town meetings that we New Englanders are so proud of. I was wondering whether the Mayor was killed because he was a subversive or whether he was standing in the way of the Free Thais."

"Odd that you should mention Xchiang," said the Ambassador, "because the USIS Chief was talking about the same thing the other day. He suggested that maybe we should study one of these villages in operation the way Margaret Mead studies a Polynesian island. Only instead of checking up on mating customs, it would concern politics, to find out how the oriental mind, at that level, handles democracy. Then we would know if there are any basic differences between oriental and occidental thinking on the subject."

Soon the city of Bangkok appeared below the plane.

The General said, "When they find out about Chiang Mai, the reaction back home will be 'what the hell are they doing with all the aid we've given them?'"

The Ambassador sighed. "It's already an international problem. The UN holds a special session day after tomorrow. And State has observers on the way over now. Today I expect we'll get the first batch of press people."

After the plane had landed at Don Muang and the Ambassador was getting into his car, one of the airport attendants came running over. "Sir," he said, out of breath, "somebody is waiting to see you at the airport building. Could you stop there on your way out?"

"Who is it?"

"I do not know, sir. It is a woman. She came in on Pan Am about two hours ago. She has been waiting since then."

The Ambassador was annoyed. "I haven't much time . . . Ed, you and Cooper jump in here with me. I'll make a quick stop on the way out."

At the main entrance of the airport terminal an auburn-haired woman of about thirty was standing on the steps, surrounded by suitcases. As the car approached, the Ambassador looked out. "Oh, no!" he said with a groan. "Elsie Webster is back again!"

The woman stepped to the kerb. "Good afternoon, Mr. Murphy," she said when the vehicle had stopped. Cooper recognised the face of the famous correspondent.

The Ambassador leaned out of the car. "Good afternoon, Miss Webster."

"I understand you've been up-country," she began in a crisp voice. "I've just arrived to do a story and I wonder if I could get a statement from you . . . your impressions of what is going on . . ." She glanced towards the back seat of the car. "I'm on my way to town now . . ."

"Sorry, Miss Webster," said the Ambassador, "but I don't have time to talk now. I'd suggest you see me at my office." He told the driver to proceed and then turned back to her. "If you need a ride to town, Miss Webster, I've got a station wagon behind me. You can use that."

Her eyes were icy. "Thank you, sir."

When the Ambassador's car arrived at the Embassy, the station wagon pulled up behind it and Miss Webster jumped out and hurried around to the side of Mr. Murphy. As he started up the stairs, she fell into step beside him. The Chargé was waiting for Murphy in the lobby, surrounded by a half-dozen men, unshaven and in rumpled suits. Cooper recognised among them a couple of well-known correspondents. The Ambassador had been right. They were already here in force. The newspapermen glared at Miss Webster standing beside the Ambassador. Cooper began to see why it was easy to hate Elsie Webster.

"Mr. Murphy," said the Chargé, "while you were gone the lid seems to have blown off. In your office are some twixs that you should look over right away. And these men are correspondents who want to talk to you."

"All right," said the Ambassador, nodding at a few of the men he recognised. "But first, I've got to talk with General Mason privately for a few moments." Then he turned to Elsie Webster. "You can come along with the other correspondents when I see them."

Upstairs in his office, the Ambassador motioned the General into a chair. "Ed," he said, "the deluge has started. So this business between you and the Prime Minister has got to be straightened out. And right away. It can't go on in any case, but if the news hounds even suspect something is amiss, it will be much worse."

The Ambassador shoved aside the pile of telegrams. "Let's lay our cards on the table, Ed," he continued. "I've got something here I want you to read." He reached in his desk drawer and pulled out a letter written on the heavy crested stationery of the Prime Minister and slid it across the desk.

The General picked up the letter. It was from the Prime Minister to the Ambassador, notifying him that he intended to request the recall of General Mason. Mason, the letter stated,

had made it impossible for the Thai Government to "continue to repose in him the faith necessary for the conduct of the Advisory Mission."

The General, his face impassive, put down the letter.

"Did you notice the date?" asked Murphy. The General nodded. It was dated the same day he had held his last conference with the Prime Minister.

"Yes, sir," said the General.

"As you see, Ed, I've taken no action on it. Would you like to know why?"

The General nodded.

"Because I was waiting until we found out something about the leak on the grant. And now we know. The reason MAAG got the grant was because of what you told Senator Blake and his team, and it was to be used in a way that would best suit the needs of these people as you and I saw them.

"I don't feel, Ed, that the Prime Minister wrote that letter of his own accord. I'm sure he was forced to write it. To keep his *prima donnas* in line. I intended to talk over the letter with him, and if I surmised this were true, I'd have told you about it and would have withdrawn my approval of the grant and suggested you reapportion it closer to a three-way split . . ."

The General started to speak but the Ambassador stopped him.

"Just a moment, Ed. Let me finish. I would have done that not because you were wrong but because it is important that the present government hold together. If it toppled now it would be re-established but there would be a different line-up; one we are not familiar with. Since this attack, however, the situation has changed."

"Yes, sir."

"Because of that, I want you to do something for me, as a personal favour."

"I'll do my best. But with that letter in existence . . ."

"I know, Ed. So I want you to go back to your headquarters and act as though you had never seen it. I want you to wait

for a phone call. I'll gamble you'll get one today or tomorrow. It will be from the Prime Minister and he will ask your advice just as though nothing had happened. Would you be willing to go ahead anyway?"

The General was silent.

"I realise what I'm asking," said Murphy, "and you have every right to walk out of here and tell them to go to hell. I would understand. But I wish you'd think about it."

"They're bogged down right now. And all these military actions were done without consulting me. Why should they listen now?"

The Ambassador leaned back in his chair. "Because you and I know that the original advice you gave them was good. And the Prime Minister is soldier enough to realise it. So what else can he do now but just brazen it through?"

The General sat with his elbows on the arms of the chair, thinking. Then he said, "I'll be waiting for the phone call."

"Thanks, Ed."

Back at MAAG headquarters, Cooper sat down at his desk. The events of the past few days reminded him of Korea, when life had been a succession of crises and days passed with dreamlike rapidity. The excitement gripping Thailand seemed to have crept into him as well. During the trip up-country, however, he had looked upon the events with different eyes. Now, for the first time, he was on the outside, looking in, a spectator who at any moment would be required to leave.

He sat, jabbing his pencil into the desk blotter, thinking that in a few days he would be an employee of the East-West Trading Company, in civilian clothes, selling vacuum cleaners and electric toasters. If it weren't for that announced plan, he reflected, he might have been given Mannon's job up at the Parachute School.

He looked up to see the General standing in the door of his office, watching him.

"Jim," said the General, as the aide jumped to his feet. "Get

me these files from the safe, will you?" and he handed him a pencilled list.

"Yes, sir." Still holding the list, Cooper turned back to him. "Sir," he began, without knowing what he was going to say, "about our conversation the other day . . ."

"Yes?"

"I mean, about my resignation . . . well, I think you've got enough to worry about right now without that. I'd like to remain here on the job, if possible, until you feel you don't need me any more. I haven't actually put in a formal request yet . . ."

"I don't understand you," said the General. "You've got plans for your future and they include a job and marriage. Why are you suddenly willing to hold off?"

"Those plans were made before the attack," said Cooper, somewhat embarrassed. "I mean I don't just want to walk out . . ."

"Have you changed your mind?"

"Not exactly. It's just that . . . well, I realise that I'm not very important, but if I could be of help by staying around until you get someone else . . . or until this thing is over . . ."

The General stood looking at him for a moment, the suspicion of a smile on his lips. "Are you sure it isn't because you don't want to miss anything?"

Cooper grinned in spite of himself. "That's part of it, I guess."

The General walked over and put his hand on his aide's shoulder. "Okay, Jim. Stick around. We'll need everybody we can get for a while. I appreciate the gesture. It means that we'll be leaving for up-country pretty soon. I want to find out what the hell's actually going on . . ."

"Yes, sir," said Cooper, with a smile of relief.

Later that afternoon, back at MAAG headquarters, Cooper was busy at his desk when Miss Patterson appeared, quite excited. "Elsie Webster just walked in! She's downstairs now and wants to see the General."

Cooper looked up. "Okay, Peggy, send her up."

She hesitated a moment. "Don't you want to come down and meet her?"

"Not particularly."

Miss Patterson seemed disconcerted. "She's downstairs now with Colonel Childs. Elsie Webster." She repeated the name as though he were hard of hearing. Then she turned and left, obviously annoyed.

In a few moments, Colonel Childs appeared at the head of the stairs escorting Miss Webster, his face painfully self-conscious. Watching her advance towards the desk, Cooper saw the same cold blue eyes and tight mouth he remembered from the airport.

"Captain Cooper," said Childs, trying hard to keep ostentation out of his voice. "This is Miss Webster. Elsie Webster."

Cooper rose. "Hello, Miss Webster. I saw you at the airport."

She smiled briefly and nodded. "I'd like to see the General," she said.

"I'll tell him you're here," he answered and disappeared into the General's office.

"Ask her to wait outside a few moments," was the General's reply.

Cooper asked her to sit down for a few minutes. Childs looked nonplussed. He stepped up to the desk and said, in a low voice, "Does the General know who is waiting?"

Cooper nodded. "He knows who Miss Webster is. And he asked her to wait. He's busy."

Colonel Childs turned to her. "Please sit right here, Miss Webster," he said, and she took one of the wicker chairs, obviously ruffled. She petulantly pulled a cigarette out of her bag, which Childs immediately lit for her.

"Well," he said, after a moment, "if there's anything I can do, Miss Webster, just let me know," and he drifted off down the stairs after a glance at Cooper which said, "I've done all I could . . ."

In about five minutes she was seated in the General's office. "I've just come from 'Mad Mike's,'" she said. "He gave me the big picture of what's going on. I'd like to get some details to fill in. I'm sure you've got a comprehensive grasp of the situation, General."

"I'm afraid there isn't very much to tell right now," he answered, sitting back in his chair. "I assume the Ambassador gave you the story of the two towns up north, and Xchiang in the East. At the moment the Thai Army is engaged in retaking them. The affair is fluid and we'll know more a little later."

"But you just got back from . . . where is it . . . Chiang Mai?"

"That's right, Miss Webster. I'm sure the Ambassador told you what we saw."

She dismissed his remark with a wave of her hand. "What I'd like to know is what's behind all this. Are the Thais in revolt against their government, or are these people up north Communists?"

"Now you're in the realm of politics," said the General. "Didn't the Ambassador explain all that to you?"

Miss Webster evidently realised that she was dealing with a difficult interviewee so she tried a technique which usually worked. She fixed her blue eyes on the General and sat back, silent and accusatory, as though he were deliberately concealing the truth. Unfortunately for her, this happened to be the General's favourite *coup de maître*, and she found herself staring into a pair of equally cold eyes.

She gave in. "General," she said, "let me explain how I

work. I'm over here for Locke publications. And I need background material for a round-up story. You're the military adviser but I can see you're also an astute man and I'd like to bet you probably know more about what's really going on behind the scenes than any other single individual in this country. I'd like to present your story and your views to the people who . . ."

"But I have nothing whatever to say to the public, Miss Webster," said the General. "That's the Ambassador's job. As for the military angle, you want to talk to the Thais. They are the people involved. And they would probably like the publicity."

"You say 'publicity' as though it were a dirty word," she snapped.

"There are times when it is," he answered blandly. "Now look," he added, "there's no point in all this sparring. If you'll ask me what you want to know, I'll try and oblige. But no political questions. As for the Thai military forces, I'm here only as an adviser."

"Do you have MAAG people out now with the Thai units?"

"Yes."

"Were any of them involved with the units that are now fighting? I mean the units at Mong San and Mong Rai?"

"No."

"What part does MAAG headquarters play in the fighting now going on?"

"We are continuing our job of giving advice, when it's asked for."

"But certainly, General, in battle the advisers can't limit themselves to advice. Suppose the unit is overrun?"

"Then they, of course, will defend themselves."

"Is there any MDAP equipment being used by the revolting units?"

The General looked at her with cold blue eyes. "I don't know of any revolting units, Miss Webster."

"I mean . . . the units in Mong Rai and Mong San . . ."

"Nobody has said that those units are 'revolting.' And I'm sure the Ambassador didn't say that either," said the General, sharply.

Miss Webster fumbled for a moment with her handbag. "Sir, do you have any objection if I talk with a few members of your staff?"

"My staff has been instructed not to discuss the matter with anyone."

"I understand, General," she said. "Do you have a war room set up that I might look at?"

"I'm sorry, Miss Webster, but I would suggest that you look at the Thai war room. General Kawee is your man."

She stood up. "Thank you, General," she said briefly and as she started for the door she paused. "I wonder if I might pick up a vehicle to run me over to General Kawee's office . . .?"

"Unfortunately," replied the General, "we haven't any vehicles available for that purpose."

"Oh, I know that, sir," she replied, with a hard smile. "There never are. I'm referring to a lift to the Thai war office. Most commanders can manage some kind of transportation . . ."

The General rose and walked to the door with her. He called out to Cooper. "Jim, see if you can call Miss Webster a cab or something."

Standing at Cooper's desk, looking through her bag for another cigarette, she snapped, "I think your boss needs some instruction in handling the press, Captain."

Cooper didn't comment. "Do you want a cab, Miss Webster?"

"Never mind," she said. "I'll find my own transportation," and she walked down the hall and down the steps.

A few moments later, Cooper happened to look over the railing. Elsie Webster was standing at the front entrance with Colonel Childs as the Colonel's own vehicle came up the drive. With a flourish, Childs helped her into the back seat and then stood, beaming, as his vehicle drove off.

The Prime Minister walked into his office and sat down at the polished desk. It had been a stormy session in the conference room, almost like one of those in the dark days of 1941 and '42. Then, however, the situation had been hopeless. Now Thailand had a trained army and air force and advisers from a once-enemy country. Again a colossus was standing outside the walls, his toe prying open the gate but this time the invader would find himself face to face with another colossus. The Prime Minister sighed—it had been the history of his country for as long as anyone could remember.

He shook his head at the thought of the hard-working MAAG people who had laboured mightily to help develop his forces. The surprise attacks had probably convinced them that his intelligence system wasn't functioning properly but there was no way to tell them that the real Thai intelligence net had nothing to do with clerks patiently recording bits of information in journals; it was an oriental structure of exquisite resonance, which caught subtle whispers, warning coughs and the faint crackle of banknotes being passed from hand to hand, something that blunt General Mason would never understand.

The Prime Minister smiled as he sat thinking of the General and the vague uneasiness he exhibited whenever he dealt with Thais, an uneasiness based on honest distrust of subtlety.

Then his mind moved to Pridi. Like the phoenix, he had risen once again from the ashes and was playing for another chance at power. So far, none of the informants in the northern jungle had been able to find out the time and place that Pridi would strike, but the Prime Minister could feel it coming. He could almost hear the sounds of the gathering forces as they assembled for the onslaught.

He realised that nothing more could have been done to keep out the steady infiltration of agents from Pridi's headquarters.

The Westerners found it hard to believe that the borders which looked so solid on maps were actually—except along the Mekong River—ill-defined areas in the lush jungles in whose semi-darkness the tribes of Shans and Chins and Karens had, for centuries, eked out their feudal existences, paying grudging acknowledgment to the governments of Bangkok, Rangoon and Saigon.

A knock on the door interrupted the Prime Minister's thoughts. General Kawee walked in with a nervous smile on his face and sat down beside the desk with a sheaf of newly arrived reports.

"The Commander of the infantry at Mong San was a Pridi man," he said, "along with about a quarter of the company. The night of the attack the Commander threw a big party for everybody, and in the middle of it the rebels showed up. It wasn't hard. Those of the company who wouldn't co-operate were killed or sent across the Mekong. The Commander himself was later shot but that was the result of an argument with the Free Thais over tactics."

"How about Mong Rai?"

"The Commander was loyal and they didn't try anything with him. But the mortar battery was holding a party on the Commander's birthday. He was drunk and somebody asked him for the keys to the motor pool so they could drive him home. He handed over the keys to the whole works, including the ammunition shed and the equipment storehouse."

"And how about Xchiang?"

"The police knew of at least twenty-five Pridi men who had slipped in during the last few months. But they didn't know about a hundred more who evidently swam the river. The infiltrators got the signal and killed the Mayor and took over the town."

They went on to review tactics. Kawee was of the opinion that the hold-up at Mong San was due to Marshal Chit who wanted the attack to be completely an Army show. He had

been misled by his younger officers who insisted on bringing up tanks and artillery. And now much of the equipment was stuck somewhere along the roads.

The Prime Minister made no comment but reflected that Field Marshal Chit had made a nice gesture. Moving tanks from Chiang Mai and Bangkok was proof that he was not involved in any coup plans.

It had taken a half-hour for the Prime Minister to convince the Field Marshal that his tactics were wrong. Chit had finally agreed that the use of pack artillery by guerrilla-type forces could clear up the situation without causing wholesale killings and possible civil war. It would also prove that Radio Hanoi and Radio Peiping were lying when they screamed that the downtrodden Thais were being brutally handled by the government.

Air Marshal Wicharn, in the conference room, had jumped into the discussion with a guarantee to blast everybody out of the area with bombs and napalm and get troops to the border in twelve hours. His argument had been that it was only a question of time before Pridi's men would cross the Mekong in force. If the Thai Army were still twenty or thirty miles to the rear, who would meet the attack?

The Prime Minister's answer had been that the Thai Army couldn't meet an all-out invasion in any case. For that they would need the help of allies.

Wicharn's counter-argument had been that if Pridi continued to send men in dribbles across the river, he could build up enough strength to take over North Thailand without recourse to warfare at all.

The Prime Minister had patiently explained that this would work only as long as the other nations were convinced that these people were indigenous Thais. But that theory had already been blasted in the United Nations Assembly.

Even as he spoke, in the back of the Prime Minister's mind was gnawing doubt as to the Air Marshal's motives. He seemed so eager to get the rest of the Army out of Bangkok.

That would leave his own defence troops, only thirty minutes from Government House by truck, and the Navy marines . . .

At the end of the meeting it had been reluctantly agreed that the Prime Minister would expedite the pack artillery and light weapons deliveries to the northern troops.

"That means just one thing," said Kawee. "You've got to talk with General Mason. I can handle it with Hawley, but that isn't quite the same thing."

The Prime Minister nodded, rocking back and forth in his chair, thinking about his letter to the Ambassador about Mason. He hadn't wanted to write it, but it was the outcome of a heated session dominated by Wicharn. Furious at being left out of the special grant, he had told the Cabinet all about it. The Prime Minister had been faced with the humiliating fact that he knew nothing about a grant.

But he was able to smile grimly at the news of what had happened to White. In the old days, he reflected, a betrayer of White's sort simply got his head chopped off.

The Prime Minister had never questioned the General's honesty and had recognised almost instantly just what the American was trying to do with the special grant. The letter had never been intended to go beyond the Ambassador anyway. The Prime Minister had fully expected a call from Murphy. Then he would have let himself be talked into retracting it. But the Ambassador had not responded and, with the mess at Mong San and Mong Rai, there might be disastrous repercussions if the letter ever got to Washington.

He looked up to find General Kawee waiting patiently for his answer on Mason. "Call the General and ask him to see me tomorrow afternoon," he said.

When Kawee had left, the Prime Minister sat back in his chair. He felt suddenly very lonely. Other than the effusive Kawee who was, after all, only a sounding board, there was no high-ranking man he could talk to who understood what had to be done.

Marshal Chit was an old friend and loyal supporter, but he

was thinking about retirement now and planning to enter a Buddhist monastery. Wicharn, the quick, predatory Air Force Chief, was too self-centred and too vain. By dealing with White he had compromised himself in the eyes of the Americans. And, of course, he had an eye on the Prime Minister's job.

The Prime Minister reflected, with sadness, that none of them had ever taken the trouble to learn how to deal with the ferungs; how to read the expressions on their faces and interpret the little motions of their bodies as they spoke. Each of his chiefs had protested that their lack of English handicapped them. They didn't seem to realise that lack of linguistic knowledge was often a help. With an interpreter they could dispense with the effort to understand and simply sit back and watch.

His co-workers lacked another quality. They had no real sense of leadership... the duty to be a mentor and guide. They didn't possess the delicate touch of the teacher—sometimes severe, sometimes gentle, but always present. They thought that standing in the receiving line at Government House in the manner of the old royalty and greeting foreigners was the height of achievement. He had watched the faces of his compatriots as they responded to the salutations, the toasts, the music of the band; none of them seemed to realise that Government House receptions were the most revealing of all functions, if a man watched and evaluated.

The little man with the brilliant eyes sat at his desk, feeling very much alone in the room's baroque splendour. It was not a new sensation; it seemed to him that he had always been alone.

The team of three officers summoned to investigate Colonel White arrived from Tokyo, and Cooper took them to their quarters at the Chakri Hotel. He did not see them again until one morning, a few days later, when they reported to the

General's office. The chief of the team was carrying a thick file under his arm.

They spent a long time with General Mason. Later in the day, Colonel White arrived, affecting a jaunty air. He was in the General's office for over an hour. When he came out he did not stop to speak to Cooper but hurriedly left the headquarters.

The General handed Cooper a thick envelope marked "Private" and asked him to place it in the office safe. Consumed with curiosity, Cooper asked, "Sir, does this wind up the White affair?"

The General nodded. "Yes. If anyone should ask, Colonel White is being reassigned in the States."

Cooper stood looking at him for a moment. "You mean, that's all?"

The General looked up at him. "I don't understand you, Cooper."

"I'm sorry, sir . . . but . . . it could have been much more, couldn't it?"

"Yes," said the General. "It could have been a court-martial. But I think he's learned his lesson."

"Sir, because of him, the whole programme was jeopardised . . . and your dealings with the Prime Minister . . ."

The General laid down his pencil. "Jim," he said, quietly, "I don't intend to discuss this but I appreciate your . . . concern. White shouldn't have told the Thais about the grant. But what happened after he did . . . well, this is Thailand, and some of the things that happened were inevitable."

"But, sir, your position . . ."

The General looked at him with a wry smile. "Vindictiveness now will not improve my position. Colonel White has had almost thirty years of service but perhaps he wasn't suited for dealing with people like the Thais."

"Yes, sir."

Cooper took the file back to his desk. Miss Patterson came padding over.

"Here, Peggy," he said. "Have the Adjutant lock this up in the AG safe."

She glanced at the package. "Colonel White?"

Cooper nodded.

"What happened to him?"

"Reassigned to the States."

"Reassigned! You mean he's not going to be court-martialled?"

"Now Peggy, we're not going to discuss this . . ."

She shrugged. "Don't worry. I couldn't care less. But you mean he's gone? For good?"

Cooper nodded and she smiled. "I just wanted to be sure, that's all." Then she glanced towards the General's office. "I just don't understand the military mind."

Cooper laughed. "I don't either, sometimes. Maybe that's why I'm a Captain."

Later in the day, Lieutenant Colonel Neumann, who had investigated Mannon's death, reported into the office and Cooper sat in on this conference.

"General," Neumann began, "you may find my story a little unbelievable."

Then he proceeded to go over his report, step by step. He explained that about a month before the fatal jump, the unit began to run short of break-cord—the fastening which breaks as the paratrooper's body, after leaving the plane, reaches the end of the suspension line. In breaking, it frees the parachute from the plane, enabling the jumper to continue his descent to the ground.

The Colonel reported that no record had been found of any order being forwarded to replenish the supply and Sergeant Bayat admitted he had forgotten to reorder. According to Sergeant Kelly, he and Mannon had experimented, using Kelly's barbells, and found that ordinary cotton shoestrings would break under approximately the same conditions. The two of them decided to use this substitute on their own chutes,

saving the break-cord for the Thai troopers. Kelly admitted they knew the practice was illegal and extremely dangerous.

When the chutes were being packed for the returning guerrillas, Kelly told the packer to use shoestrings on the Major's chute and then sent Gony to the house to get some. Gony, not understanding the purpose of the request, pulled "shoestrings" out of the Major's boots. However, these particular laces were not cotton but rawhide. The packer, following instructions, went ahead and packed the chute using the rawhide. For good measure, he also used some of the rawhide in lacing up the back pack. The chute went forward with the others and, while Major Mannon checked all chutes before the jump, he evidently gave only a cursory glance at his own.

"What happened in the plane when the Major was caught at the end of the static line?" asked the General.

The Colonel described the unavailing efforts of the Thais to pull Mannon back into the plane and gave as his opinion that had Mannon been cut loose he would have opened his reserve chute and floated down safely. The medical report proved that the delay, leaving him dangling so long in the propeller wash, had proved fatal. However, Colonel Childs had explained that down on the ground he had no way of knowing whether or not Mannon was conscious. His instructions to try and pull him back in and to land the plane were, in his judgment, entirely proper.

It was Colonel Neumann's final conclusion that (a) Mannon had erred in ordering the substitution for the break-cord and (b) Colonel Childs' decision could not be considered negligence, although in retrospect it had been bad judgment.

The General studied the written report for some time. Then he called in Colonel Hawley and instructed him to have a complete review made of all safety procedures at the Parachute School. He also instructed him to send a representative to Lampang to study the supply procedures and institute necessary measures to ensure the uninterrupted flow of supplies.

When he had finished, the Colonel said, "Sir, I have something here which is outside the scope of my investigation but I think you should know about it. Sergeant Kelly brought it up. Major Mannon sent back a coded message from Chiang Mai on the first day of the guerrilla problem. It was given to Colonel Childs to forward to Bangkok. Sergeant Kelly does not remember seeing it go out. He had a copy made and put in his safe. I have it here." He laid it on the desk and the General picked it up and read it aloud.

LAST NIGHT IN MONG RAI OVERHEARD PRIDI MAN FROM CHINA SAY SUBVERSIVES WILL GRAB MONG SAN AND MONG RAI IN ONE WEEK. FREE THAIS WILL CROSS MEKONG RIVER 29 JUNE AT THESE TWO POINTS IN FORCE. BELIEVE THIS IS GENUINE. DETAILS ON MY RETURN.

"Great God!" said the General. "When was this received?"

"On the 27th of May, sir. Exactly one week before the trouble started at Mong San and Mong Rai.

"How did you say it came in?"

"Mannon telephoned it to Kelly using some private code. Kelly had instructions to forward it to Bangkok immediately. Kelly never saw it go out but he assumed that Colonel Childs had sent it . . ."

"Get Childs up here!"

"Childs, what do you know about this message?" asked the General a few minutes later as he thrust the paper into the Colonel's hand.

Childs blanched. "General," he said, slowly, "this message was sent in by Major Mannon during the first day of the guerrilla exercise. I didn't understand it so I decided to wait for details later, when he returned. Then, of course, there was the accident, and, well, I never did get to talk to him, of course . . ."

"Christ almighty! This was urgent! I can't understand your waiting in the first place. But accident or not, didn't you make

any attempt to follow through? Didn't you talk with anyone else on the problem?"

"Sir," said Childs, visibly shaken, "the accident was a pretty serious affair . . . there was the investigation . . . and I was transferred to Bangkok . . ."

"You mean you simply forgot about it?"

"Not exactly, sir, but things happened so fast . . ."

"Childs," interrupted the General, tossing the message on the desk, "from what has come up during this investigation, it looks as though Lampang under your command was a pretty sorry mess! I haven't got time to go into the details right now but when this is all over I'm going to have a full-scale check-up made of your activities at the Parachute School. That's all!"

"Yes, sir," and he left the office.

"Who else was involved in collecting information for this message, do you know?" asked the General.

"Not for sure," said Neumann. "But I questioned a Sergeant Chai who was with Mannon in the jungle."

"Jim, get the G-2 in here right away. And thanks, Neumann. I'm glad you were so thorough."

When the G-2 had read the message he whistled softly. "General," he said, "I find this hard to believe. It looks as though Mannon somehow managed to stumble on to an incredible piece of intelligence." He glanced up at the calendar on the wall. "The 29th is the night of the full moon," he added.

"I see you haven't forgotten Korea, Colonel," said the General.

"No, sir. That wouldn't be easy!"

"All right, then," said the General. "I understand that a Thai sergeant named Chai may have been with Mannon when he found this information."

"But the surprising part is that the first half has already proven to be true!"

"That's what I mean. If the second part is correct, we've got about ten days to prepare for it."

"Sir," said the G-2, "I'd better contact Chai so we can evaluate this. I'd better run up to Lampang right now and talk with him."

"Good," said the General. "It's too late for a plane. Take my jeep and driver. As soon as you can, phone me back here. Don't mention details, just let me know how good the source is. If it sounds any good at all, I'll turn the message over to the Prime Minister."

About an hour later, Cooper received a phone call from General Kawee wanting to talk with General Mason. When the General picked up the extension, Kawee's voice sounded as casual as though he were inviting him to a golf match. "Hello, Ed," he said. "Sorry about your last call, but the PM was very busy. Haven't seen you in quite a while. How have you been, Ed?"

The General smiled at the nickname. "I've been fine, Kawee."

"Good. Glad to hear it. Listen, Ed, how about dropping over to Government House for a talk with the PM. Say, tomorrow afternoon?"

"Kawee, I've got a lead on something hot. It should be confirmed in about four or five hours. If I'm right about how good it is, I want the Prime Minister to hear it immediately."

There was a pause. "Make it tonight, Ed. About eight o'clock."

The General put down the phone and, with the shadow of a smile on his face, called out to Cooper. "Tonight at eight, Jim. Government House!"

That evening, the General's car approached Government House through a cordon of sentries. Several tanks had been drawn up on the lawn and a machine-gun installation had been erected at each of the high iron gates, complete with sandbags and telephones.

Inside, General Mason and Cooper were immediately ushered through a waiting crowd of military personnel into the Prime Minister's office where he sat, urbane as ever, with no sign of anxiety on his face. Cooper marvelled again at the composure and steel-wire strength of the slight man with the brilliant eyes.

He came around the side of the desk when the General entered. "Good evening, General Mason," he said, extending his hand.

Then he motioned towards the gold-brocaded sofa. "It has been a long time since we talked together."

"The Prime Minister regrets that there was such a delay," said General Kawee. The General smiled and nodded, and Kawee went on, "A great deal has happened since we last met."

"Very much," interjected the Prime Minister. "Some was good. Some very bad. Things have been done, under the pressure of circumstances, which were unavoidable, General. I hope you understand . . ."

The General nodded his head.

"I want you to know," continued the Prime Minister, "that I have never for a moment doubted your integrity . . . It is a difficult thing, sometimes, to be Prime Minister . . ." and he raised his hands from the chair in a gesture of resignation.

"I'm sure it is, Excellency," said Mason.

"...almost as difficult, I suppose, as being a MAAG adviser . . ." he added.

The General nodded his head.

"I am sure, however, that your duties will be lighter with your new chief of staff . . ."

The General remained impassive—it was Cooper who looked surprised. The Prime Minister continued smoothly, "I understand Colonel White has been relieved. Perhaps he has learned that in his position one cannot play *le dessous des cartes* and hope to get away with it!"

After a nod of agreement from General Kawee, he went on. "I think you know, General, that at the moment we are in a rather trying position. We need advice. Perhaps you have thought of something?"

The General looked at him pointedly for a moment. "Sir, the Ambassador and I were in Chiang Mai a few days ago. We had a look at the unit being held up by the roadblock . . ."

General Kawee broke in. "We lost four tanks in that engagement, Ed."

"Tactics, I'm sure, can be worked out by the commanders and the advisers. I was thinking of the problem on a larger scale."

The Prime Minister leaned forward. "We would like to hear your comments, General," he said.

"Well," continued the General, "I'm sure you realise how difficult it is to move tanks and artillery using your present road net. My suggestion would be to consider the use of lighter weapons. As for Mong San and Mong Rai, it might be a good idea to use helicopters to put troops behind the roadblocks—or maybe right in the towns—and have them attack southward in conjunction with the troops you now have moving north." The General went on to suggest that they attempt to get to the border as soon as possible. Then he asked the Prime Minister point-blank what his estimate of the situation was regarding the Free Thais. The latter declared that, aside from a few malcontents, the entire situation was brought about by the Free Thais from China. He spoke about the difficulty of patrolling the entire border of Thailand and his fear that the infiltrators

would presently call for "aid" from across the border, precipitating an invasion. "Whether they make it an armed invasion or only cross the Mekong," he continued, "depends on what we do at Mong San and Mong Rai. But, you see, General, we also have a problem. If we crush these actions with napalm and bombs, the Free Thais can declare that we are using brutal methods on our own people. That is why we have been so cautious. On the other hand, if we do not crush the action, we will appear to be weak and they will simply cross the river, en masse, to help their 'brothers.' "

Their conversation was interrupted by a telephone call for General Mason. When he returned, he handed the Prime Minister the message from Major Mannon. "When the Major was on a guerrilla-warfare exercise," he explained, "he came across some information which was so startling that my people were reluctant to believe it. I've had the G-2 checking at Lampang and he just informed me that he believes it is reliable."

General Kawee leaned over the shoulder of the Prime Minister reading the message. "But Ed," said Kawee, "how did they ever get hold of anything like this?"

"I don't know for certain, right now. But you can see that the first part of the message has already taken place."

"The 29th," said the Prime Minister; "that's only nine days away."

"That is the night of the full moon, Excellency."

The Prime Minister looked up with a slow smile. "Perhaps there is something to be said for the American intelligence system."

They discussed whether the crossing would be armed or unarmed. "Perhaps," said the Prime Minister, "the real purpose of Mong San and Mong Rai is to find out what we've got . . ."

"In that case," said Kawee, "if we use helicopters and parachutists and the air-ground teams, we would be telegraphing the punch."

"After all," interjected General Mason, "the actions at the two towns are very small in comparison to a river crossing. If they thought that your present operations were the best you could do, you might catch them off base completely on the 29th by using all your resources in one surprise action."

"If we used everything we have," said the Prime Minister thoughtfully, "we would have to leave Bangkok practically defenceless . . . against . . . anything at all."

"You've only got nine days, Excellency," broke in the General. "It would seem that a decision should be made immediately."

Cooper, his notebook resting on his knee, saw an old story repeating itself. Generals Kawee and Mason sat studying the carpet while, wrapped in a sudden mantle of loneliness, the Prime Minister seemed to study the ash at the end of his cigarette. His was the final decision. Cooper thought how often before the frail figure had been faced with these decisions.

The Prime Minister carefully flicked the ash into the tray and turned to the General with a ghost of a smile on his face. "General Mason," he said, quietly, "as my adviser, what is your recommendation?"

The General thought for a moment. "I can speak only of the military aspect of the situation, of course," he began. The two Thais glanced at each other. "And there may be other incidents which will occur, designed to get you to disperse your forces throughout the country. But if you were to prepare for a 'Sunday Punch' with all your resources for the night of the 29th, while it would be a big gamble, it might prove to be a big success."

A silence fell over the group. Then the Prime Minister cleared his throat and glanced at Cooper, who realised that he was expected to get every word down in the notebook.

"I will accept your recommendation, General," he said, slowly and carefully. "We will prepare all our resources for the night of the 29th. Meantime, we will try to reduce the Mong San and Mong Rai situation using the ground troops that are

presently up there. The . . . defence . . . of Bangkok will have to be left in the hands of fate . . .”

As he and the General left the Government House in the sedan, Cooper could not help thinking what a hellish time the Japanese must have had with the little man in the white suit.

50

Within the next few days, the tempo of military and government life in Bangkok speeded up. Every plane brought in more observers, correspondents and visitors. Soon all the hotels were filled to capacity and newspapers announced that the Prince and Princess Yuthakan had graciously offered the use of one of their former palaces in downtown Bangkok as a hotel. Guests found themselves assigned to musty, high-ceilinged rooms crowded with Edwardian furniture. Ornate gas chandeliers of tarnished brass were festooned with naked electric light bulbs and shiny new fans augmented the slow-moving punkhas of another era. The teak-panelled reception hall sported a bar, and out in the hallway a steel desk with a plastic top was the repository of loud complaints about lukewarm bath water and exorbitant prices.

General Kawee's public relations crew worked around the clock turning out glossy prints of artillery firing in the jungle and of the Royal Thai Air Force planes on napalming missions in unspecified locations.

Kawee's office also produced film covering every conceivable aspect of Thai life. Soon American TV audiences were familiar with the Prime Minister's smile and with the face of the handsome young King who was depicted deep in conference with Ambassador Murphy. The American's stalwart, white-haired figure formed a striking contrast with the slim, grave young ruler of the threatened kingdom. Debates in the United Nations were covered in detail by newspapers and magazines

that also began printing maps of Thailand. Millions of people came to know the words "Mekong" and "Suwadi" and "ferung," and pictures of the beautiful young Queen became as ubiquitous as those of the First Lady.

MAAG worked in high gear. Colonel White had been reassigned to the States and his unceremonious departure for a new assignment in New York State went unnoticed officially but the rumour of security violation followed him.

A room was set aside in MAAG headquarters for the briefing of newspapermen, containing a large-scale map and extracts of all the latest briefings. Lieutenant Colonel Childs, as the G-1, was chosen to supervise it.

All incoming equipment for the Thai Army was expedited from the West Coast through the port of Bangkok. Mechanics were flown in from Clark Air Force Base to assist in readying Thai planes and helicopters. The Thai air-ground school and the guerrilla-warfare school began operating double classes.

Day by day, pressure on MAAG and the Embassy increased from the news media. Reporters were starting to get restive at the slow advances being made in northern Thailand and the stories they sent back to the States became, daily, a little less enthusiastic.

Security at MAAG, with the awful example of Colonel White still fresh, was impregnable. Colonel Childs had his hands full. "Guy" was the press liaison officer, and this left him on call at all hours, for Miss Webster never relaxed her clutch after the first interview with the General. Elsie's continuous demands for transportation often resulted in his using samlors and taxis to get home at night. Other reporters were not long in finding out the source of Miss Webster's apparently unlimited transportation and soon they, too, were badgering "good old Guy" for cars. He lived in perpetual fear that the General would discover the real extent of his conniving to utilise various vehicles for these unauthorised trips. He would have been even more unnerved had he known that the

General was familiar with his operations but had told Colonel Allard not to interfere unless they got out of hand.

In conference with the Prime Minister and the heads of the Services, General Mason agreed that a full dress rehearsal for the action on the 29th should be held. An area in southeast Thailand was picked, near the naval base at Sattahip and greatest secrecy was enjoined on everyone involved. It was decided that General Kawee would hold a news conference at Government House on the day of the manoeuvre to keep the newsmen occupied.

Cooper did not accompany the General to Sattahip on that day but, instead, went to the news conference with Colonel Allard. General Kawee introduced the Prime Minister who opened the proceedings with a brief résumé of the situation to date. Cooper observed that, immediately after he finished speaking, he disappeared.

The conference also included the showing of film clips which Cooper recognised had been made during various former manoeuvres, interspersed with a few shots from the current operations at Mong San and Mong Rai.

The lengthy affair was smoothly presented but the newsmen present did not seem overly impressed. During the question period, some of the queries were pointed and General Kawee was hard put to produce satisfactory answers. Are the armed forces planning anything big? Are you waiting for outside help? What plans are there for the use of the Air Force? Will paratroopers be used? What about the latest charges from Radio Hanoi on oppression of the hill tribes?

The conference concluded with a lavish buffet; Cooper was glad to get away. He had noticed one odd thing. Miss Webster hadn't been present. At least he hadn't seen her anywhere nor was her cool, clipped voice heard during the discussion period.

On the following afternoon, Mason had been in his office only about an hour when Miss Webster appeared at Cooper's desk with a request to see the General.

"General," she began, after seating herself at his desk, "I understand you didn't attend the news conference yesterday."

"That's right, Miss Webster. I was busy."

"Quite a few of us from the news services have come to the conclusion that something must be going on that we haven't been told about."

"What do you mean, Miss Webster?"

"Surely the Thais are going to do more than keep attacking at Mong San and Mong Rai? Are they bogging down? I've been here almost a week now and I haven't seen anything much they've done. I spent some time at Xchiang the other day and they're still fooling around trying to take back the town. Now I know the Prime Minister said he doesn't want loyal Thais shot; what about the disloyal ones? Don't the Thais have an air force? or paratroopers?"

"Have you talked with the Thais?" asked the General. "They're the ones to release information on their own troops."

"General Kawee refers us to you. And you refer us back to him. It's beginning to get old, General."

"Well, I don't know of any other way . . ."

"Now look, General. You're the Chief of MAAG and I respect your position. But I've got something to tell you. Yesterday I went to Sattahip!"

The General sat back in his chair.

"Yes. I went to Sattahip. On my own. Oh, they wouldn't let me near the restricted area. But I had a pair of field glasses. And I saw some kind of a manoeuvre going on. Air Force planes strafed and napalmed. Helicopters carrying troops and guns were used. And I saw an airborne drop. I watched the vehicles leaving when it was all over and some of them had MAAG licence plates. So there is obviously something cooking. All of us have known that not even the happy Thais were just going to sit here waiting for God knows what while their chances of cleaning up this thing just went down the drain.

"So I'm simply going to send out a story saying that something is in the wind . . ."

"Now just one moment, Miss Webster . . ."

"General, censorship regulations do not apply and I'm simply drawing my own conclusions."

"I would like you to do something for me, Miss Webster. Please wait outside for a few moments."

She rose. "All right, General, I'll wait," and she walked out.

The General called Ambassador Murphy and told him what Miss Webster had found out.

"Well, Ed," said the Ambassador, "we knew that sooner or later something would slip out on the plan. I think now is the time to call in the newspaper people. Let me talk with the Prime Minister on this and I'll call you back."

In about five minutes the Ambassador was on the phone again.

"At my office, Ed, 5 p.m. today. I'll send out the word and you tell Webster to be there. Ask her not to mention anything to anyone until then."

That afternoon, promptly at five, the Ambassador's aide carefully checked off the newsmen entering the office. When they were all present, the aide shut the door and took up his position outside. In the office, seated around the Ambassador's desk, were General Mason and General Kawee.

"We've called you in here today because we've got something important to tell you," began the Ambassador. "But before we begin, I'm going to have to have your word that none of this is released or even discussed outside this office until we tell you when. I need that assurance, personally, from each of you."

One of the men spoke up. "I don't see any Thai newspaper people here. Are they in on this too?"

General Kawee answered "They'll be given this information at a later date."

When Mad Mike had assured himself that they all

understood the restrictions, he nodded to General Kawee who stood up.

"A few weeks ago," he began, "the MAAG Commander, General Mason, went to the Prime Minister with some information that one of his officers had picked up. It was so incredible we didn't dare to believe it. But we have since changed our minds. Purely by chance, the officer managed to find out the date of an attack which the so-called Free Thais plan to make on this country from over the border."

The reporters looked at each other.

"This report also predicted the uprisings at Mong San and Mong Rai, which have come off according to schedule. Therefore the Prime Minister has decided to conserve our forces and secretly prepare to meet this invasion with everything we've got. That is why we haven't gone ahead faster with our present operations."

There was a buzz of excitement throughout the room.

"Do you mean that you've been deliberately holding back?" asked a voice.

"Yes."

"Suppose," said another newsman, "that it doesn't come off? Or it comes off earlier than you plan? Or later?"

Kawee shrugged. "Then we will be, as you say, 'up the creek'!"

"When do you think the attack will occur?"

"The night of the 29th," said Kawee.

Another murmur went through the group. "That's only four days away!"

"What do you plan to do, exactly?"

"I would prefer that General Mason tell you that," said Kawee, sitting down.

General Mason rose. Using a map of Thailand, he described the set-up. Guerrilla-trained commandos from Lampang would move out and infiltrate to the northern border. Artillery observers would be guided into previously selected positions to set up observation posts overlooking the two crossing sites. On

an elaborate time schedule, paratroops would be flown from Lampang to positions in East Thailand as a ruse. They would be picked up again, if needed, and dropped in predetermined positions just behind the bluffs that overlooked the river. Other troops would be prepositioned for helicopter pick-up and delivery to designated spots.

When he had finished the Ambassador spoke. He pointed out that since moonrise was at 10.18 p.m. and moonset at 4 a.m., the period between would be particularly crucial hours. He emphasised that absolute secrecy was necessary for this complicated and daring gamble.

"Will we be able to see what's going on?" asked Miss Webster.

Kawee answered her. "We will have a plane for any newspaper people who want to go to Chiang Mai leaving at 3 p.m. on the afternoon of the 29th. Your initial stories can be prepared in Bangkok and my people here will file them when the word is received from Chiang Mai. Chiang Mai will be the task-force headquarters."

"Can't you tell us any more about how you got this message? Where did it come from? Why are you willing to take such a chance on it?"

General Mason rose and told them of Major Mannon's trip up north.

"But suppose there's another attack along the eastern border at the same time? What then?" was another question.

General Kawee answered. "We're keeping close check on the eastern boundary. It's open terrain. We are convinced, up to now, that there is no activity there."

Another newsman spoke up. "But in the areas you point out as crossing sites, the other side of the river borders on Laos and Burma."

Kawee answered, "That is why we must be absolutely sure that a crossing is actually being made before we can start any military action."

Miss Webster raised her hand. "Sir," she said, "I don't

know just how to say this, but what about the situation here in Bangkok. Is there any chance that, well, that anybody might take advantage of this attack up north to . . .”

Ambassador Murphy lifted his hand as though to stop her but Kawee motioned to him that it was all right.

“The answer to your question, Miss Webster,” he answered with a wry smile, “is ‘Mai Ben Rai.’”

51

Three days before the attack was to take place, the Thai Army began moving troops into positions throughout Thailand. The feint towards the eastern border was done during daylight and troops were moved openly by truck towards the Laotian border. While this was going on, howitzers were being towed northwards and planes, loaded with men and supplies, took off from Don Muang headed East only to turn northwards after they had left the city limits.

Jungle air strips, built during World War II, were used by planes carrying troops from Bangkok and landings were made on rusting steel matting which disintegrated under the weight of the aircraft.

Back at Government House, reports had started coming in from the rangers and anti-guerrilla troops who had jumped or infiltrated into the Mong San-Mong Rai area. Thanks to the training, inaugurated by Major Mannon and continued by Colonel Thom, the young soldiers from Lampang were able to live in the deep forests and keep in continuous communication with the nearest headquarters at Chiang Mai. They were the ones who reconnoitred for future assembly areas, landing and drop zones for paratroopers, and observation posts for the artillery. Their reports mentioned a new influx of Free Thais from across the border who were assuring the populace that they would soon be free from government fetters. The local Thais, their lives already disrupted by the fighting of the past

few weeks, looked with suspicion on these newcomers with grim faces and hard eyes. The rangers also reported abandoned temples which showed glimmers of light during the hours of darkness.

The MAAG G-2's notebook contained an entry made during his discussion with Sergeant Chai at Lampang . . . "Mr. MacEldowney." G-2 felt that MacEldowney should be contacted again to see if additional information could be obtained on the situation. Cooper, overhearing the conversation in the General's office, volunteered to try and find him. Accordingly, the next morning he was in a plane, with Sergeant Chai whom he had picked up at Lampang, on his way to a rendezvous with the Thai rangers who would guide them into Mong Rai.

"Major Mannon was your friend?" asked Chai.

Cooper nodded.

"Soldiers at Lampang wish all MAAG advisers to be like Major Mannon. He was our friend also."

"I don't doubt that."

"Everybody like Major Mannon. He go in jungle with us and eat iguana and bamboo shoots. When he die, Sergeant Kelly get very drunk. He say Colonel Childs kill Major."

"Now wait a minute. The Sergeant was probably very drunk, all right, but he wasn't telling the truth . . ."

"He say he tell Colonel what to do but Colonel will not do it."

"No, Chai. That's not right."

"After Major Mannon die, Colonel Thom is very sad. He have priests in temple to say prayer. He ask who wants to go to temple and every man say he want to go. So Colonel close school for one day "

Cooper sat looking out of the plane window so Chai could not see his face. The Sergeant's halting words had evoked the priests in saffron robes, kneeling before an impassive Buddha, wreathed in clouds of incense, and behind them the rows of soldiers chanting a prayer for the soul of Francis Xavier

Mannon, the altar boy from St. Peter's in Columbus, Ohio, because "He was our friend" . . .

The rangers were waiting for the plane at the appointed place and it took several hours of walking through dense woods before the guides pointed out a stone house on a bluff overlooking the river. It was MacEldowney's house. They were met by the trader and in the living room, after introductions and an offer of a drink of Mekong, he told Cooper of his meeting with Mannon and repeated the details of their conversation. Then Cooper produced a map of the area and pointed out the two sites which had been selected as the possible crossings.

"This one ain't right," said MacEldowney promptly, pointing to the Mong Rai location. "Hell, they wouldn't cross at the ferry landing. Banks too steep. I'll show you where the bastards will come across." He took Cooper by the arm. Upstairs, in the front bedroom the river was visible and MacEldowney pointed to a wide sand bar almost directly below his house. "See that sand bar?" he asked. "And look at that nice easy slope. They'll cross here, believe me. And right over the river, in them trees over there, is where my friends tell me they got stuff stashed away."

Cooper had an idea. After he had discussed it with MacEldowney the trader agreed that he would move out to the Electric Hotel with his daughter for a few days and allow his house to be used by observers. In the discussion, Cooper did not reveal the exact date or the magnitude of the operation but merely indicated that some Thai and MAAG personnel would "observe" the river bank for signs of crossing.

On the morning of the 29th, the movement of troops and weapons towards Chiang Mai increased. At eight o'clock an all-out attack was launched against the rebels at Mong San. Troops were instructed to destroy the insurgents and then turn eastwards and engage the Mong Rai garrison. Cooper had just handed the latest reports on the attack to General Mason

when Miss Patterson appeared in the doorway. "The Ambassador!" she said excitedly. "His car just drove in."

A visit of Ambassador Murphy to MAAG was a relatively rare occurrence and the General was leaving his office to go downstairs and meet him when Mad Mike appeared at the head of the stairway.

After asking Cooper to close the doors of the office, the Ambassador took a seat beside the General's desk. "Ed, excuse this informal visit but I wanted to see you before you took off for Chiang Mai." Cooper noticed that the Ambassador's broad face had lost its customary smile. "Ed," he continued, "there's something you should know before this whole thing starts today. Just about all the troops are gone from Bangkok, along with the tanks and guns. The only troops here today are the police, the Air Force regiment out at Don Muang and those Marines, wherever the Navy is hiding them. Now I'm not saying that it will happen or that we expect it to happen, but it *could*. I mean the biggest coup this country has ever seen. So while you're up in Chiang Mai, I wish you'd keep your eyes open for anything that looks odd or strange. I don't suppose the Admiral will be there, but Marshal Chit and Wicharn and all their boys should be. If they aren't, or if they leave suddenly, then something is going on down here."

"But, sir, tonight the big attack is expected . . . surely they couldn't be fooling around with . . ."

"Wait, Ed," said Murphy. "If that message that Mannon found is correct, and they do cross, then I'm sure nothing at all will happen down here. But suppose there is no crossing? Suppose it was all a hoax? Don't you see the opportunity that's open with all the Prime Minister's supporters gone from Bangkok? And I'm not talking about another little game of musical chairs. Suppose Pridi has been able to get to some unhappy member of the régime? It could produce a hell of an upset."

The General sat silently looking at the Ambassador.

"You know, of course," continued the Ambassador, "the

party hands have been on the outs ever since they got word of that special grant. Maybe the Prime Minister is figuring that this threat will pull them together again. But he's taking one hell of a risk and I've never known him to get in a position like this before. He's staking everything on your recommendation." He grinned. "You must have a hell of a persuasive way with these Thais, Ed."

"But, sir," said the General, "we've known all along that he was going to conduct this operation. Do you think it was the wrong decision to make?"

"I do not, Ed. I just didn't realise until now that the Prime Minister was actually going to go all out. I still think the decision was the right one. It's just that he hasn't left anything at all behind here."

"I believe that was also my recommendation," said the General dryly.

"And a good one! I'm not denying that. But just keep your eyes open tonight."

The Ambassador rose and extended his hand to the General. "Good hunting, Ed. And the luck of the Irish be with you tonight!"

"Thank you, sir."

General Mason and Cooper met the Prime Minister and Field Marshal Chit at Chiang Mai late in the afternoon. The Prime Minister explained that Air Marshal Wicharn thought it best to remain in Bangkok and direct the Air Force activities from his headquarters at Don Muang Airport.

At five o'clock in the afternoon, General Kawee arrived with the correspondents, just in time for the evening meal which was served in a mess tent in the headquarters area. Once again Cooper inhaled the familiar odour of treated canvas, musty hemp and the smell of petrol cooking ranges.

After eating, the correspondents made their way to the war-room tent, stepping over guy ropes and skirting the steel cables of the radio aerials, as the tropical night swiftly descended over

the camp. Lights had been switched on inside the tent and the sides had been dropped and staked down.

Général Kawee announced that during the day, Thai troops had succeeded in overrunning the Mong San position and were now engaging the rebel mortar battery at Mong Rai, to draw attention from the planes and helicopters skirting the hills bringing in troops to defend the river banks and set up observation posts. In his mind's eye Cooper could see, all over northern Thailand, the air crews eating their evening meal under their planes and the paratroopers making last-minute checks on their equipment. He also knew that at MacEldowney's stone house on the bluff, observers must be setting up their equipment, sandbagging the windows and checking communications equipment.

In the tent, folding field tables and chairs had been set up in a semi-circle around the brilliantly lighted map. The Prime Minister, Field Marshal Chit and General Mason sat facing the map. Behind them were the folding chairs for the staff officers and, behind them in the semi-darkness, were the seats for correspondents. General Kawee sat beside the map, next to the radio and telephone operators. A large clock was suspended over the map and all eyes were aware of it as the hands slowly crept from six-thirty to seven.

At eight forty-five a loud message came in over the radio. "Movement has been sighted across the river from Mong San," Kawee said, in English. One of the Thai officers plotted the co-ordinates and General Kawee plugged in a set of ear-phones and picked up the microphone. The exchange of Thai continued for about five minutes, prompting the correspondents to lean forward in interest. Then Kawee handed the instrument back to the operator and turned to General Mason. "It has stopped now. A few men moving on the opposite bank. Nothing definite."

By nine-thirty, lassitude settled over the tent. Correspondents slumped in their chairs and General Kawee lit a cigarette. Then, as the hands of the clock approached ten, the

tension began to build up. Everyone in the tent knew that the moon rose at ten-eighteen, and that all over Thailand, planes would be warming up in anticipation of a mission in eighteen minutes, paratroopers would be seated in planes awaiting take-off instructions.

The minute hand of the clock crept towards ten-ten, then ten-fifteen. At ten-eighteen the tent was so quiet that the voices of the KPs in the kitchen could be heard. Then it was ten-twenty, then ten twenty-five and finally ten-thirty. There was still no sound from the radios or telephones. At ten-forty General Kawee, at a signal from the Prime Minister, picked up the radio mike and called the forward command post to ask if they had received any information from the observers. The answer was "no."

At eleven o'clock, one of the officers stepped into the tent and motioned for General Kawee to come outside. After a few moments, Kawee returned and beckoned to the Prime Minister who rose and followed him out. A feeling of uneasiness swept through the tent. However, Marshal Chit imperturbably lit a cigarette and General Mason doodled on his pad. In about fifteen minutes, Kawee and the Prime Minister walked back into the tent. Kawee's face was grave but as he faced the bright lights of the map board he quipped about a gravel-voiced radio operator beside him. "His voice," he said, "isn't as nice as Brigitte Bardot's . . . but then look where hers has been!"

Polite laughter greeted his sally but the newspapermen kept their eyes on the Prime Minister, who leaned over and muttered something to General Mason.

Cooper, consumed with curiosity, waited a few moments and then casually walked by the General's table. "Anything I can do?" he asked, bending over the General's shoulder. The latter shook his head and then wrote on his pad. Before the General casually crossed it out, Cooper read, "All civilian communication with Bangkok went out fifteen minutes ago."

Slowly Cooper walked back to his chair. Several Thai

soldiers appeared with trays of coffee and sandwiches. As he sat down and attempted to eat, Elsie Webster seated herself beside him. "Everything all right?" she asked, accepting a sandwich from the Thai soldier.

"Everything's fine," said Cooper with a smile, wondering just what the hell was really going on.

52

It had been a long night for the men at Observation Post Alpha outside Mong San on a bluff overlooking the river. The MAAG representative, Major Hood, looked at his watch which indicated that it was midnight. Seven hours before, he and the party had landed by helicopter in a tiny clearing just behind the highway where they had been met by two Thai rangers. Carrying their radios, rations, ammunition and instruments, they had crept through the woods, across the main road and out to the edge of the bluff to a spot previously reconnoitred by the rangers. Taking care that the clink of their shovels wouldn't be heard, they had dug in. It was almost an hour before the trench was completed and camouflaged with leaves and grass. Along with Hood from MAAG there was the Thai infantry observer, the artillery observer and the air observer, each with his radio. Making themselves as comfortable as possible, they trained their instruments on the river bank and began the long wait.

At about eight-fifteen the artillery observer had picked up some movement along the opposite bank. Black figures were visible on the white sand. He reported back to the task-force headquarters but the activity had lasted only five minutes and it was not determined what the figures were doing on the sand spit.

The hours continued to drag by. At ten-eighteen, the moon had risen and each observer, tense as a wound spring, had waited for the first telltale move on the bank that would mark

the beginning of the attack. But the bank lay quiet, drenched in moonlight, and gradually the tension subsided.

They smoked innumerable cigarettes in cupped hands. The knowledge that somewhere behind them in the jungle were the Free Thais, and behind them, scattered for miles across the countryside was the entire might of a nation, waiting for a single word from them, had become almost unbearable. The eerie silence was broken sporadically by the sounds of the jungle at night...an occasional unidentified howl, a sudden rustling in the bushes and, once in a while, the faint but spine-chilling screech of some small animal succumbing to the law of tooth and fang.

Back in the big tent in Chiang Mai, lethargy had once more settled over the occupants. Cooper was beginning to get sleepy. Stifling a yawn he noticed Field Marshal Chit doing the same thing. Looking around him, he saw that the staff officers had changed shifts and the ones now on duty were alert and wide-awake. The correspondents were frankly and unashamedly tired. Some of them had left their chairs and seated themselves on the ground, their backs propped against a tent pole, their eyes closed. Now and then one of them visited the latrine and the side of the tent trembled when they stumbled over guy ropes.

Only two men, the Prime Minister and General Mason, continued to sit, unmoved, in their previous positions. As Cooper thought about the situation it appeared more and more grotesque. A conversation, overheard at the window of a schoolhouse a month before, by a man now dead. A meeting in a deserted temple. A few remarks made by a suspected felon about something he heard from a group of tribesmen in the jungle. And now, based upon nothing more than that, the entire forces of a country were poised to fight a battle for survival.

Cooper studied the two figures sitting motionless before the map; the slender man who bore the weight of a kingdom on

his shoulders and the heavy-set one who had staked his military reputation and the prestige of his country on this operation.

Cooper opened another packet of cigarettes. It was disturbing to reflect that Childs might have been right after all. It was apparent now that his casual dismissal of the message as a product of the febrile imagination of Major Mannon revealed more common sense than did the actions of the two men sitting before the map; the inexplicable failure of communications with the capital city hinted at the possibility that the whole thing might have been a gigantic hoax to get troops out of Bangkok.

The hours ticked by. Cooper tried to console himself with a remark General Mason had once made in Korea: nothing in war was ever quite so good . . . or quite so bad . . . as the first reports indicated.

The hands of the clock pointed to 4 a.m. and the General and Prime Minister were engaged in low conversation, probably discussing the orders necessary to return the troops to their bases. Cooper walked outside to the latrine where he saw the first faint streaks of day in the eastern sky. Returning to the tent, he lifted the flap—and stepped into pandemonium.

The Prime Minister and the General were at the map, surrounded by staff officers. All radios and telephones seemed to be in operation at once and General Kawee was shouting to the newspapermen above the noise.

At the observation post the hours since midnight had crept by slowly. The strain of sustained concentration had begun to take its toll. Occasionally one of the observers would climb out of the trench, stretch or relieve himself and then slip back in. Every thirty minutes a radio check had been made—a few muttered words with hand cupped over the mike.

Major Hood rummaged in his musette bag and found a can of K-ration cheese which he opened and started to eat. He was not particularly hungry but his mouth was stale from too

many cigarettes. In low whispers the Thai observers discussed the unlikelihood of an attack. By four o'clock, with the first streaks of dawn appearing in the sky, each had reached the unspoken conclusion that the whole operation was not going to come off.

And then it happened.

With a faint hiss, a single rocket arched up in the darkness across the river, exploded with a muffled report and a star shell hung swaying in the sky, emitting a thin trail of smoke and shedding an eerie white glare over the jungle and river.

Instantly, every hand in the trench reached for the button of a microphone and, in a few seconds, word had been received at the task-force headquarters. With field glasses and BC scopes trained on the far bank, they watched and waited. Soon they could distinguish columns of dark figures emerging from the darkness across the sand bar towards the river, some of them carrying rafts.

To the men in the dugout, it seemed an eternity before there was any reaction from their side of the river. Only one man in the kingdom could give the word to fire . . . a slim man somewhere in the rear; a man whom they had never seen closer than on a reviewing stand in a uniform laced with gold braid.

The word to commence firing was finally received and the artillery observer, trying to keep the excitement out of his voice, pressed the button of his microphone . . . "OP Alpha . . . Fire Mission!" The air observer called back through task-force headquarters for an air strike and the infantry observer contacted the commander of the company dug in along the forward edge of the bluff.

The brief, tropical dawn had already turned into early daylight and the first wave of rafts had been launched before the whistling shells of the adjusting battery were heard overhead. In a few moments the dull boom of exploding artillery reverberated along the bluffs. The rounds had landed far over the

river bank. When the observer had located the two columns of black smoke his next command, "Drop 500," brought two more rounds to the top of the hill. The command "Drop 200. Fire for effect!" was followed by the whistle of six shells and suddenly a half-dozen explosions appeared on the sand bank. When the smoke lifted, twisted black shapes could be seen against the white sand and there was a great scurrying back and forth as tiny figures milled around like an ant column that has been disrupted.

"I'll bet that was one son of a bitch of a surprise!" said Major Hood, surveying the sand spit through his glasses.

Thereafter, the air was alive with the soft, ominous whistling as shell after shell hurtled through the air and the far bank was covered with geysers of sand. One of the bursts landed in the river. Two rafts suddenly up-ended and their occupants disappeared in the deep, swiftly moving stream.

In MacEldowney's house at Mong Rai, several miles up the road, controlled excitement filled the upper bedroom. Lieutenant Colonel Harbin, the MAAG adviser, stood in the window looking at the bank of the Mekong River through his field glasses. The first wave of invaders had crossed the stream at the exact spot MacEldowney had indicated was a logical crossing site. They were deploying on the sandy stretch when the Thai infantry, dug in along the bank, opened fire on them. Coloured tracers from the machine guns swept back and forth across the bar and men crumpled up and dropped on the sand. The rest of them, flinging themselves on the sand, started to crawl across the open area trying to gain shelter under the bluff. The Colonel winced at the sight, remembering his own experience at Omaha Beach.

"Where the hell are the planes?" he called out. The Thai air observer answered, "They are coming!" In a few minutes, the Thai Air Force planes roared towards the river. The order to suspend artillery firing during the air strike had barely been given when the observers saw the first plane peel off and dive

towards the crowded sand spit. The whistle of the plane reached the house at the same moment the sand became alive with dancing points of light as tracers from the aircraft swept the bank.

The strafing plane completed its run and shot skyward as the next aircraft approached the target. Tiny black objects skittered downward and grey geysers of sand and smoke rose from the exploding bombs. The third plane followed, flying very low. In its wake clumsy napalm tanks tumbled crazily to earth and long sheets of flame rose along the edge of the river.

"Jesus Christ!" muttered the Colonel, watching the scene through field glasses. He heard the artillery observer give the command to resume firing and a little later rifle shots could be heard from the direction of the bluff; evidently some of the rafts had managed to cross the river in spite of the air attack and the invaders were being taken under fire by Thai troops dug in along the edge of the high bank.

The napalm had burned itself out on the sand spit and columns of figures were beginning to re-form when the artillery again suspended fire just before another sortie came overhead and the same pattern of destruction was repeated.

Colonel Harbin was sure that the invaders, not having expected any initial resistance, were reacting by bringing their artillery and mortars forward and placing them in firing positions. As though in verification, about thirty minutes later the whistle of incoming shells could be heard. The first few appeared to be light artillery but soon a short, hollow swoosh announced the first of the heavy mortar rounds. Then shells began bursting along the forward edge of the knoll on which the house stood.

"They're starting to range on us. We'd better haul ass pretty quick," said Harbin to the Thai Commander, who replied, "I find out if OP Echo can take over."

At that moment two figures, in combat jackets and helmets, appeared in the doorway. The Colonel swung around.

"Cooper! What are you doing up here?" he called out, in surprise. "Is the General with you?"

Cooper shook his head. "No, sir. He's at the task-force CP. This is Elsie Webster," he added as she stepped forward.

Looking at the surprise on the Colonel's face, Elsie added, "It's all right, Colonel, I've got permission."

"Elsie Webster! That makes it official!" said the Colonel with a smile. He jumped up. "But we're getting ready to move out. Those bastards are starting to zero in on us. Take a quick look anyhow!" and he handed her his glasses and indicated another pair to Cooper. "Are the recon planes up yet?" he added.

"Yes, sir. We just saw them," said Cooper.

"Good! We really surprised them. Fantastic! They'd expected to float across the Mekong and just stroll in. They'll never forget this morning!"

"Do you think they'll keep on trying?" asked Elsie, looking through the field glasses at the opposite bank.

"I don't know what they've got behind them up in the hills. They just might make it. But I don't think so. And it won't be the way they figured."

"Maybe they'll try another crossing somewhere else," said Cooper.

"They might. But they're backed up for miles in those draws, and with the Thai Air Force clobbering them, I don't see how they can. Especially since the recon planes have them under observation now."

Another mortar round landed. This time behind the house and the Thai Commander called out, "OP Echo taking over. We go!"

"Yeah! Let's get the hell out of here!" said the Colonel. Cooper and Miss Webster were still at the window when the Colonel politely reached for their field glasses.

"They don't seem to be doing much right now," said Miss Webster, handing back the glasses.

"The Free Thais probably won't try crossing here again,"

said Harbin, "not with the Air Force waiting for them." He gave the glasses to the Corporal. "Their artillery can knock this place down, though. I'd stay if we were in the cellar but the roof is too flimsy—a few two-by-fours and some tiles."

Another round hit the forward edge of the knoll. The observers, their equipment packed, headed for the staircase, followed by the Americans. As they thundered down the stairs a round landed close by the house and they heard someone cry out.

"Must be one of the sentries!" said the Colonel, wrenching open the front door. They stepped out on the porch to see a man stumble up the steps, clutching his side with both hands, blood welling between his fingers.

"It's MacEldowney," shouted Cooper. "You're supposed to be back in the hotel . . ."

The man collapsed on the upper step. Kneeling beside him, Cooper, the Colonel and Miss Webster could see the haemorrhage welling up. The man looked down at the red tide. Then he looked up. Their expressions confirmed his fears.

"What happened?" asked the Colonel.

"I come down . . . ta see . . .," and he looked with a kind of fascination at the blood. "I hadda . . . get something in the cellar . . ." He raised his head and Cooper saw that his eyes had already taken on a glazed stare. "I guess . . . I done the right thing though . . . huh . . .?"

MacEldowney's last question went unanswered as he slumped down on the steps. The pulsing stream under his relaxing fingers lessened and a widening pool spread out beneath his rumpled trousers. The Colonel was bending over him when the whistle of another incoming round caused everyone to instinctively duck their heads. It landed on the slope.

"We must go now!" said the Thai officer coming up behind them. The figure of the man, oddly waxen and shrunk, lay across the steps. The Colonel rose, shaking his head. "Never should have come back!" All of them jumped up and double-

timed towards the road. A sudden loud explosion behind them caused them to turn. A mortar round had gone through the roof and exploded inside the house. A cloud of dust, glass and debris blew out through the windows and broken tiles whistled around them.

"Jesus!" said the Colonel. "That was close!"

When they reached the road they saw several platoons of infantry moving towards the bluff, evidently on their way to reinforce that position. They could hear the whine of planes overhead as another sortie headed for the river.

"OP Echo is doing all right," said the Colonel. "I'll go along with the Thais. You both had better go back to the CP."

"What's going on at OP Echo?" asked Miss Webster.

"Nothing more than what you saw here," said the Colonel. "I've no objection to your coming with me, but if another crossing is being made, you would do better back at headquarters."

"Come on, Miss Webster," said Cooper, taking her by the arm. "Let's see what's going on at the CP."

Both of them said goodbye to Harbin and got into the jeep.

At the task-force CP, where the brass had gathered, Cooper and Webster learned that the crossings had been decisively repulsed at Mong San and Mong Rai and the recon planes had not spotted any other attempts. It was also explained that civilian communications with Bangkok had been interrupted the night before by a team of Free Thais who cut the telephone wires south of Chiang Mai and captured a radio relay station nearby. By early morning, however, Thai Army troops had succeeded in regaining the station and the up-country system was presently in operation under their supervision.

After about an hour, the General and the Prime Minister prepared to leave for Chiang Mai.

"Miss Webster," said General Mason, "I still don't know quite how you managed to get up here, but I do admire your persistence and your initiative. You'd better come back now with us in the helicopter."

"Yes, sir," she said. And this time Cooper noticed that her smile was genuine.

Although the special plane with the correspondents had left Chiang Mai, Miss Webster was able to get back to Bangkok in the Prime Minister's own plane and she filed her first story on the crossing from General Kawec's office.

General Mason and Cooper remained with Field Marshal Chit until the following morning when it was determined that the operation had succeeded and no further attempts would be made to cross the Thai border.

In Bangkok a holiday had been declared. The Buddhist temples were holding thanksgiving services and the spirit of carnival ruled the city.

Repercussions of the operation already echoed around the world. The communications failure on the night of the attack delayed the release of the initial news stories, so word of the attack went out almost simultaneously with news of its defeat and the Thais became the heroes of the free world. The suddenness and size of the attempted invasion, the incredible speed and vigour with which it was resisted was something new. A tiny Far Eastern nation, faced with a Communist attack, had plunged forward, on its own, without waiting for the ponderous political machinery of either its allies or the United States to go into action—and had won a decisive victory.

In his office at MAAG headquarters, the General was advised that the American Secretary of State and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff had arrived in Thailand. They were waiting at the Ambassador's office to discuss the operation with him.

It was mid-afternoon when the General, after conferring with his staff on the events of the past few days, left for the Ambassador's office after telling Cooper he could have the rest of the day off. As soon as the sedan had left the compound,

Cooper drove to Tongchai's house. He wanted to be waiting for her when she got home from the Ministry.

The moment he unlocked the door he knew something was wrong. Everything was in place; the shelves with the red spice cans, the Indian lamp, the divan, but the louvres were closed, the curtains drawn and an air of utter silence and emptiness hung over the room. Only the faint cries of the boatmen on the river and the occasional throb of a tugboat engine broke the stillness. Perplexed, he walked around the room. Opening the cupboard door he found it empty except for his uniform. He closed the door, the hinges grating loudly in the silent room. Then he noticed an envelope on the coffee table and opened it.

Dear Jimmy :

I am sorry that I must write this note instead of telling you. But it is better this way. I am going to Saigon. I know you love the Army very much and I do not want to keep you away from it. I think you will be happy to remain in the Army and I do not think you would like to be a salesman and live always in Bangkok.

I will take Pon and the Ramwong record with me to help me remember.

I love you,
Tongchai.

He stood, letter in hand, looking around him. After the first shock of disbelief, he thought of flying to Saigon, but even as he looked at his watch he knew, in his heart, that it was useless. The dream was over and Prasert had been right. It would have been easier if she were dead; the thought of her living, breathing, smiling, somewhere in the world, was almost too much to bear and he covered his face with his hands as a wave of bitter loneliness and grief swept over him.

When he looked up again, the room had become like a tomb. Stuffing the letter in his pocket, he turned and walked

out swiftly, slamming the door behind him, and drove, in a reckless daze, to the Chakri Hotel.

He walked into his own room in a daze, barely greeting his room boy who, smiling and happy to see him back, ran around, opening windows and asking him about what had happened up-country. The first thing he did was to pick up the telephone and call the Ministry of the Interior and ask for Tongchai. "I am very sorry," said a polite voice, "but Miss Tongchai Thanom is now in Saigon. She has been transferred."

Then he called Prasert and asked him to drop in at the Chakri on his way home. Cooper poured himself a drink and sat down. He was still seated in the chair when Prasert arrived an hour later.

"She's gone, Prasert," said Cooper, after a perfunctory greeting, and handed the Thai the note. Prasert read it and handed it back, then accepted the drink Cooper had poured for him.

"Why?" asked Cooper. "That's all I want to know! Why?"

Prasert tasted his drink and then set it down. "Jimmy," he said, "I think you knew she would go away, didn't you?"

Cooper shook his head. "Of course not. She said she loved me. For her I quit the Army . . . and now this! Prasert, was there somebody else?"

"No," said Prasert. "I am sure there was nobody else. It's all very simple. She is a Thai."

"That's no answer! Don't Thais act like human beings? Don't they understand what love is . . . and marriage? What are they, anyway?"

"Remember," said Prasert, quietly, "I told you a long time ago that the Thai women are not like ferungs. They don't feel the same way about many things."

"Jesus Christ, Prasert. I threw away everything I'd worked for all these years. Because I love her. Now you say she doesn't feel the same way. You mean she just got tired of me? Is that it? She's just a whore who . . ."

"You are talking like a ferung."

"Goddamned right! I *am* a ferung!"

Prasert was silent and Cooper pulled himself up. "I'm sorry, Prasert-san."

"You don't understand, Jimmy, that's all. She loved you and the little room and the secret life. She did not want to be a MAAG wife or a salesman's wife, and she did not want you to be a salesman. Because pretty soon you would not like it and then you would blame it on her. Don't you see? She wanted to be happy with you by the river. But you wanted to change it to something else, and then both of you would be unhappy. Why can you not just accept this and forget the whole thing?"

"Jesus Christ! That's easy to say! Just forget the whole thing . . .," and as he talked, Cooper remembered the painting in Dick's Restaurant; gaunt Renee and his "Prenez Garde!" . . . "Now I've really had it," he continued. "My Army career is gone . . . she's gone . . ." He turned back to Prasert. "I suppose you got the clearance papers by now?"

Prasert shook his head.

"How come? Haven't they okayed them yet?"

"I didn't put them in, Jimmy."

Cooper stared at him in disbelief. In spite of himself, he felt a surge of relief. "Why not?"

"Because I waited for you to change your mind. I was so sure that something like this would happen. Now you can stay in the Army."

"The hell I can! General Mason knows I want to get out."

"You can change your mind."

"Not with Mason I can't. I've just had it, that's all. Prasert," he added suddenly, "do you mean she went away just because she didn't want me to be unhappy? She's wrong, because I would . . ."

"Wait a minute! Already you want to make her the . . . heroine. You are romantic already! The Thais are not so self-sacrificing as that. I will not allow you to feel sorry for

yourself. Tongchai will not sit home in Saigon and cry about it. She wanted to go. By this time you must understand the Thais well enough to know that!"

Cooper sat staring into his drink. "This is it!"

"Perhaps it is not so bad as you think," said Prasert.

53

During the next few days, a series of high-level conferences were held at Government House and Cooper found himself the official recorder—his days spent in feverish notetaking and his evenings in transcription, with a guard from the Thai Army sitting in his hotel room to safeguard the top secret documents.

Prasert, knowing that Cooper was reluctant to go back to Tongchai's room, quietly saw to it that the gramophone was delivered to the Chakri and other items disposed of.

The conferences were climaxed by a ceremony in the Palace, where the Secretary of State, Chief of Staff, General Mason and Mad Mike were awarded the Order of the White Elephant by the King. Elsie Webster had remained in Thailand and her story of the awards wound up the series of articles she had written for Locke publications.

The next day, invitations were delivered by special messenger to a farewell dinner for the departing VIPs at Government House. Due to the imminent departure of the guests, it was necessary to hold it at 8 p.m. the same evening. Cooper hand-carried the invitations to the General's house. Mrs. Mason was in the living room and asked him to sit down.

"A great deal has happened since I talked to you, Jim," she said pleasantly.

He nodded. "It seems as though I've lived a whole lifetime..."

"This will probably be your last dinner at Government House, I suppose," she said rather sadly. He nodded without speaking.

"However," she continued, "if you're happy, that's what really counts."

He nodded, wishing she would stop talking about it.

"I suppose you're happy to be back with Tongchai, after the affair up north . . ."

"Tongchai isn't here," he said, a note of embarrassment in his voice.

"Not here? What do you mean?"

"She's gone away. To Saigon."

"Saigon? I don't understand, Jim. If you're going to be married . . ."

"We're not. She just took off. Left a note. I guess she didn't want marriage after all."

Mrs. Mason looked at him for a moment. "But what about your plans . . . for the job with the trading company . . . your resignation from the Army?"

He shrugged. "I don't know what's going to happen right now. My Thai friend didn't put in my request through the Ministry. At least the General was spared *that*!"

"But if Tongchai has gone, and you don't have a clearance to work, I should think you'd reconsider your resignation from the Army."

"I couldn't. I've already told the General."

"But does he know about . . . this new turn of events?"

Cooper shook his head.

"Why don't you tell him? You know he's always liked having you for an aide. And he's very pleased with your work as recorder at the conference. I think you ought to mention it to him."

"I just couldn't. I was ready to walk out on him when he had all kinds of trouble. If I asked him now . . ."

"Jim! Be honest. You know you don't want to leave the Army. Isn't that true?"

He nodded.

"Then go in and tell Edwin about it and stop being foolish!"

"Mrs. Mason, I appreciate what you're saying. But there are some things I can't do."

Mrs. Mason sighed. "All right. It's your own problem, of course." She rose and smiled. "I won't hold you up because I know how busy the headquarters is right now. I still think you ought to discuss it with Ed, though."

Back at the headquarters Cooper walked in and had just sat down at his desk when General Mason called him in.

"I want to pass on to you the commendation from the Chief of Staff for your work at the conferences," he said. "And the Secretary of State was very pleased too. You should be proud."

"Thanks, sir," said Cooper.

"Well, Jim," said the General, expansively, indicating a chair, "I suppose you'll be putting in your request for release from duty now?"

Cooper nodded.

"What exactly will you do?"

"Sir, I'll be working in one of the trading companies, I guess."

"What do you mean, 'I guess'?"

"My Thai friend never did turn in my application to the Ministry of Commerce . . ."

"Well, how are you going to support your wife if it doesn't come through?"

Cooper hesitated. "As it turns out, sir, I won't have a wife either."

"What do you mean?"

"When I was up-country she took off for Saigon. Got a job there."

"So what are your plans now?"

"I don't know right at the moment."

The General sat back in his chair. "You've managed, evidently, to manoeuvre yourself into a damned near perfect spot. You've lost the Army, the job and the girl friend. You went

up-country with me instead of carrying out your original plan. I thought you knew enough about the Army to realise that you've got to formulate a plan of action and then stick to it. It seems to me you couldn't have wanted that set-up very much."

Cooper sat without speaking.

"Somebody once said," continued the General, "that 'experience keeps a dear school but fools will learn in no other.'"

"Benjamin Franklin," murmured Cooper instinctively and then he saw a flicker of annoyance on the General's face. "Well, whoever the hell said it," the latter continued, "he knew what he was talking about. There's only one thing worse than making a mistake. And that's not admitting it."

"Yes, sir."

"Do you want to stay in the Army and continue as my aide?"

"What?"

"Eleanor just phoned me about your conversation with her. You admitted to her you did want to remain in the Army. Why is it so goddamned difficult to say the same thing to me?"

A wave of relief swept over Cooper. "But, sir, you've already sent for a new aide . . ."

"You haven't answered my question. Do you or don't you?" The General tried to suppress a smile.

"Sir," said Cooper, "I certainly do. I can't tell you how much I regret what . . ."

"An officer never apologises, Cooper. Mainly because he's not supposed to do things that require it. So don't. I knew the moment you volunteered to come up-country that you didn't really want this Bangkok set-up, and I hate to think of the Army losing a good man because he got carried away for a while." He glanced at his watch. "Now let's get the hell out of here because we've got to be at Government House at twenty hundred hours, sharp!"

Government House was ablaze with lights. The occupants of the long line of limousines moving slowly towards the marble porte-cochere could see the Thai Army Band in formation on the lawn and the beat of drums and blare of trumpets reverberated from the marble façade.

Tanks and machine-gun emplacements had been removed and the gravel drive was lined with military police in white leggings and chromium-plated helmets.

In the vaulted reception hall the Prime Minister, resplendent in his field marshal's uniform stood beside Lady Titana at the head of the receiving line as the visiting dignitaries and the diplomatic corps moved past them in what seemed to be an endless procession.

Also present were a few journalists who had remained in Bangkok for the conferences, among whom was Elsie Webster. Since her return from Chiang Mai she had filed a series of dispatches on the Mekong River operation which had elicited a personal telegram from Adolphe Locke himself, congratulating her and predicting that her coverage of the battle and its aftermath would probably win her another national award. One of the highlights of Miss Webster's story was the incident of the gallant MacEldowney who had lost his life during the battle and whose last words, according to Miss Webster's report, were, "We've done all right, haven't we?"

A certain reluctance on the part of the Thai Government to furnish background on this man had led to discreet inquiries to determine if he could even remotely be defined as any kind of a social worker. It was prudently agreed that he might best be considered a "business-man with wide interests." Miss Webster was preoccupied, at the moment, in avoiding a small, bald-headed man who had introduced himself as an adviser to the Thai Government. She felt that if he said "salt of the earth"

or dropped cigarette ashes on her gown once more, she would scream.

Cooper and Halloran, to whom the spectacle at Government House had become more or less routine, were fascinated by a small episode, unnoticed by the guests of honour but caught by every eye of the diplomatic corps. The wife of one of the newly arrived American Embassy secretaries had thought to compliment her host by wearing an item of Thai jewellery which she had bought in a local shop over the protests of her driver. It was a gold ornament in the shape of a rather large heart which she wore on a gold chain around her neck.

Moving down the receiving line, she had been flattered by the near-hypnotic stares she received from the Thais as they caught sight of her necklace. Halloran never knew how close he had come to being sent home when Ambassador Murphy overheard him mutter to Cooper, "She's wearing it a little too high . . . that's all!"

When the receiving line had broken up, Ambassador Murphy asked the Prime Minister if he could see him for a moment in privacy. In the semi-darkness of the Prime Minister's office, Murphy drew an envelope from his pocket. "Excellency," he said, "this envelope contains a letter which I received some time ago from you, concerning General Mason. I haven't discussed it with you since I assumed it might have been the result of some misunderstanding which would work itself out. Now I wonder if you consider it urgent enough to handle further . . ."

The Prime Minister sighed with relief and then smiled. "Thank you, Mr. Murphy," he said quietly, reaching for the envelope. "I appreciate your gesture. You understand that this letter was based on . . . certain mistaken apprehensions of my military people . . ."

Ambassador Murphy nodded, relinquishing the envelope. "Both copies are there," he said, "and there are no others."

The two men faced one another for a moment. "The matter has not gone beyond me," continued Murphy, "except that I

did show the letter to General Mason—just before the attack—and I believe he understands.”

“Thank you again, Mr. Murphy,” said the Prime Minister. Their hands clasped before they stepped out of the office to rejoin the throng in the reception room.

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The guests at Government House moved, in pairs, into the great dining room as the Royal Thai Band softly played an old Siamese march which General Kawee’s staff had exhumed from the archives for the occasion. It was called “Hail the Glorious, Precious Victory” and had once heralded the return of King Rama I from one of his campaigns against the Khymers.

Meanwhile, life also went on for the “other ranks” in the outer darkness.

Lieutenant Colonel Childs, sitting in the Bamboo Bar, was in a seventh heaven of delight. He had come in, annoyed because after all his work for those goddamned reporters, especially for that bitch Webster, no mention of him had appeared in any of the dispatches. Then the Second Secretary of the Belgian Embassy had invited him to sit at his table where Childs had been introduced to a regal old lady with red hair, a real Princess, who smiled graciously and asked him if he knew a Captain Cooper. As they exchanged pleasantries, he was mentally composing the letter he would write to Mother Childs later in the evening... “and I almost forgot... spent this evening with the Princess Rangsarit, an old friend of mine . . .”

He felt genial enough to wave across the room to Miss Patterson, involved in shameless coquetry with some young Marine. His composure would have been dampened had he heard the cryptic remark she made to the Marine. “I’ve been typing up

an investigation on that guy all day," she said, darkly, "and what's going to happen to him shouldn't happen even to Old White."

"Who is Old White?"

"Skip it, boy. I talk too much. By the way, have you ever been to the beach at Bang San?"

Up in Mong Rai a pretty Thai-American girl named MacEldowney was packing a suitcase in the Electric Hotel for her trip to America. The suitcase had been kept locked by her father as long as she could remember. She had found the key and emptied it of a faded silk suit and toilet articles, all mildewed with age. She was happy. That afternoon, in the cellar of their ruined house, she had pried loose a certain stone and found what her father had been looking for that fatal morning . . . a package, wrapped in oiled silk, containing over two million ticals. There had also been several other packages which she carelessly tossed away in the debris, not realising that, had they reached their destination, they would have enriched various shady persons to the extent of twenty million ticals—exclusive of the bribery, lawbreaking and degradation which would have been left in their wake.

She was going to America. Specifically to Hollywood. There, with any luck, she would see, in person, her particular idol, Rory Calhoun, whose pictures she had adored in the dismal little cinema in Mong Rai.

A few hours earlier, halfway around the world in New York City, Colonel and Mrs. White, standing in their room in the Claridge Hotel, watched the ribbon of lights around the *Times* building spell out the latest news of the Thai victory. The Colonel, on leave before going to his new post, observed it morosely, whereupon his wife took his arm. "Never mind, Alvin," she said. "You ought to realise by now that General Mason had it in for you from the start. Ah've told you a

hundred times that you were too good for that job anyhow. Now hurry up and get dressed or we'll miss the opening number . . . and you know that Copa crowd!"

Four of the girls who worked in the Thai Ministry in Saigon were having a party in their little house on the outskirts of the city. A week before they had been joined by a new girl, Tongchai Thanom, who had arrived with a great many Western-style clothes, a doll she called "Pon" and a Ramwong record. It had taken a few days for the girls to get to know her but they attributed her touch of *heng sui* to the fact that, after all, her father was Nai Thanom of Chakri University.

The girls had invited several Thai boys from the Ministry who had brought Cokes and a bottle of Mekong with them. It was a typical Thai party with much laughter and a great deal of banter. The boys made a big show of drinking the Mekong but the girls knew they disliked its taste and drank it to show off.

One of the boys had brought along a portable gramophone and some American rock-and-roll records. After they had played them over and over, someone slipped Tongchai's record on the machine and they jumped up to dance the Ramwong. Tongchai, for some reason, refused to dance and the girls had been joking with her, telling her that she must be thinking about an old boy friend whom she might as well forget.

After they had played the Ramwong several times and each of them had had a few swallows of Mekong, heavily diluted with Coke, one of the Thais laughingly pulled Tongchai to her feet. "Come on," he said, "Mai Ben Rai!" She hesitated a moment, looking around at the shabby room and the smiling faces. Then, with a fixed smile, she began to dance. Her partner thought she was delightful and as they circled about each other he resolved to know her better.

Before the evening was over, her aloofness seemed to have

disappeared and her girl friends were happy to see that she was enjoying herself immensely.

In the dining room of Government House, the Prime Minister politely inclined his head to hear the American Secretary of State express his admiration for the appointments of the Palace. Glancing around at his colleagues, the Prime Minister observed them laughing and chatting, paying only superficial attention to their guests and, once more, he felt alone in the crowded room.

He had no illusions about the victory being celebrated. He knew it was only a respite. Pridi—or somebody else—would be back again, stronger than ever and this time his country would need help, quickly and overwhelmingly. And the bonds that would ensure this help must be forged with the people presently seated around the table.

General Kawee signalled to him that the time for the toasts had arrived and he rose, tapping his spoon against a glass, urbane and smiling.

After the toasts, Cooper moved with the other guests into the salon to witness the programme of Thai dancing. Due to the importance of the occasion, the programme went on and on, the dances displaying virtuosity Cooper could not remember having seen before.

Seated beside General and Mrs. Mason, Cooper felt a sense of grateful relief. Once again he belonged; he was part of all this. It was doubly precious because he had so nearly lost it. He noticed that, as usual, the General was holding his wife's hand while they sat attentively watching the interminable dancing.

General Kawee stepped on the dais to announce that, in honour of the distinguished guests, the final number would be the national dance of Thailand . . . the Ramwong. A spluttering of applause swept through the salon as the brilliantly costumed dancers bowed and left the stage, to be succeeded by a group of young ladies in modern Siamese evening gowns and

young men in evening dress. The Thai orchestra began Ramwong.

It was "Love Is a Lonely Road."

Slowly the dancers began the graceful, sensual movements of the dance and the music floated through the beautiful saloon. Cooper suddenly felt his defences begin to crumble in the flood of melody. Every note brought her back again . . . Tongcha sitting beside him in the moonlight that streamed through the louvered window . . . her shining eyes and soft laughter . . . his golden body in the act of love. He knew that never again would life hold such stinging happiness as he had known in the little shack by the river, and the thought of her, alive and smiling with someone else to know her warmth, was too much for him. He turned his head away from the stage, his hands gripping the arms of the chair. "Oh Christ!" he said to himself, "I must forget!" And then he felt a hand placed over one of his eyes. Looking around he saw it was Mrs. Mason. She continued to watch the stage but he noticed that she slowly nodded her head, almost as though she had heard him. And understanding stood.